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ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

A DELL MAGAZINE
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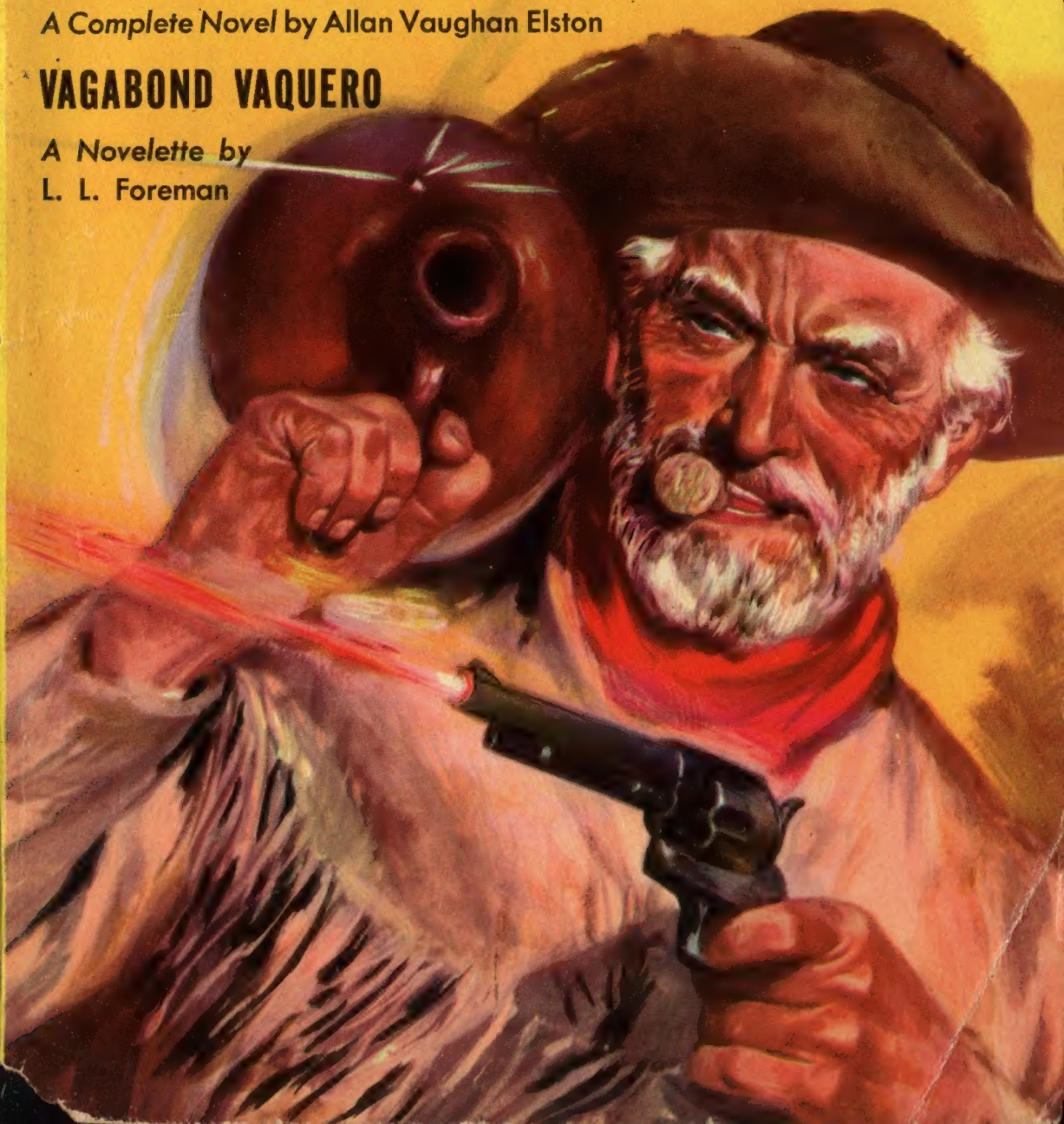
ROUNDUP ON THE PICKETWIRE

A Complete Novel by Allan Vaughan Elston

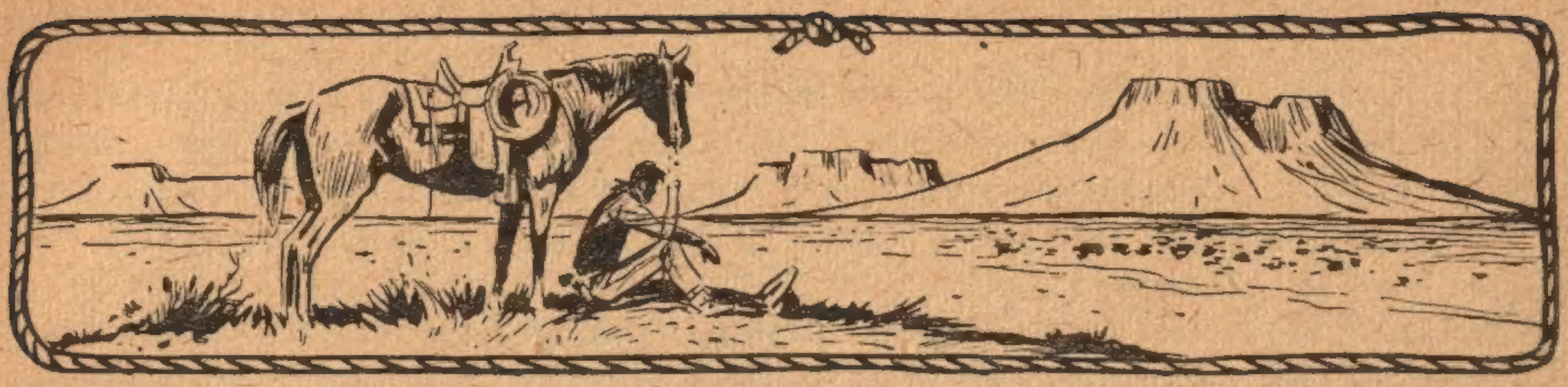
VAGABOND VAQUERO

A Novelette by
L. L. Foreman



"They've come close enough," Johnny said, firing at the leading rider.

Roundup on the Picketwire, Chap. 18



ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

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Cover picture by Nicholas S. Firfires—Frontispiece by Bob Abbett—Black and white illustrations by Earl Sherwan, Erv Schweig, Bill Terry, and Nicholas S. Firfires

Published monthly by

DELL PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.

George T. Delacorte, Jr., *President* • Helen Meyer, *Vice-President* • Albert P. Delacorte, *Vice-President*

261 Fifth Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.

by arrangement with THE HAWLEY PUBLICATIONS, INC. Re-entered as second class matter July 2, 1947, at the post office at New York, New York, under the act of March 3, 1879. Additional second class entry at the post office at Racine, Wisconsin. Printed in the U.S.A. *Copyright, 1952, by The Hawley Publications, Inc.**Address all subscriptions to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, 261 Fifth Avenue, New York 16, N. Y., or to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, Poughkeepsie, New York. Address all manuscripts and editorial correspondence to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, Racine, Wisconsin. Single copy, 25c; yearly subscription (12 issues) $3.00 in U.S.A. and possessions, and in the countries of the Pan-American Union; $3.50 in Canada; $4.00 in foreign countries. Editor: Don Ward. Advisory editor: Stephen Slesinger.* Designed and produced by Western Printing & Lithographing Co.

THIS MONTH'S COMPLETE NOVEL: *ROUNDUP ON THE PICKETWIRE*

"That even-break business gives me a pain. It may legalize killings on some ranges, but not on mine! You're out on a crusade of personal vengeance. Forget it and go home. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' Which means it isn't yours, Johnny Diamond."

Good advice—but Johnny Diamond, twenty years old and orphaned since he was fourteen, is from Texas and he isn't having any. For Johnny, at the end of a seven-hundred-mile trail which has led him from his home range to the Colorado town of Las Perdidas, believes that here he may find the brutal murderers of his father and his brothers. So Johnny disregards the well-meant advice of lawman Adam Sawyer and carries on his man hunt. His working clues are few—a beer check from a Las Perdidas bar, a pair of boots with a curious gilt design, and a mousey range mare with four white stockings, and he isn't even sure the mare is still alive! But Johnny's dogged persistence makes him bait for plenty of bushwhack lead, until even Sheriff Sawyer and his pretty daughter Flo, who like her father disapproves of Johnny's vengeance mission, think he may be on the trail of something big. Unfortunately, Johnny insists on pointing the finger of suspicion at Rick Sherwood, a widely respected rangeman with more than a passing interest in Flo Sawyer. So Johnny, hopelessly in love with Flo himself, plunges ahead, matching wits and trading shots, pushing for that one big break. At last the case is busted wide open, and Johnny Diamond's long search ends in a hot-lead payoff.

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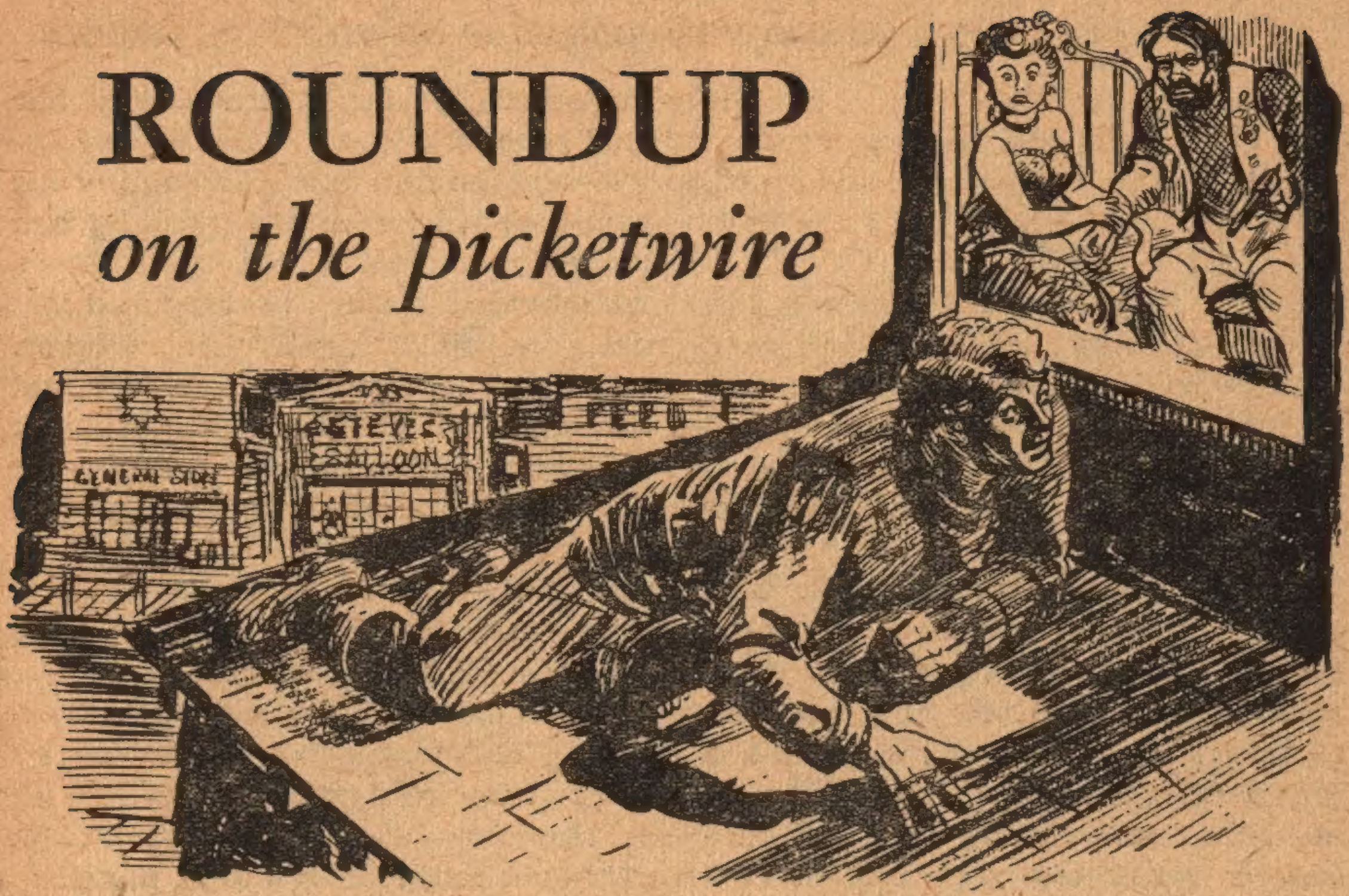
ROUNDUP
on the picketwire



An Original Book-Length Novel

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

CHAPTER ONE

Dead Man

THE SEVEN HUNDRED MILES had taken nearly four months of Johnny Diamond's young life. But his big dun gelding was still fresh as he left the headwaters of the Dry Cimarron and reined uptrail toward Capulin Gap.

Not that Johnny Diamond had ridden those seven hundred miles from Lampasas, deep in Texas, in one continuous grind. He'd stopped at ranches along the way, working day pay for money to live on.

"We're 'most there, Hackamore."

Hackamore twitched his tall ears and snorted. He was an ugly brute, ungainly in build and unfriendly by disposition, but he had long sure legs and a deep chest. He could climb like a bobcat and seldom got winded.

Far in the distance uptrail, hoofbeats clashed on the gravel. Presently a band of horses came in sight; they were being driven.

He reined a little way off the trail, pulling his bay pack mare after him, to give the remuda room to pass. They looked like half-wild range mares. Two cowboys were hazing them along. They went by too fast for Johnny to read brands. He waved to one of the men but got no response. Then they were gone, downtrail, in a cloud of dust.

Some rancher, Johnny guessed, was moving his breeding herd from one range to another. "But he oughtn't to run 'em like that, Hack. A mare could easy lose her colt, bein' jostled along

that way."

Johnny resumed his own progress. The last mile to the gap steepened, scrub-oak brush closing in from both sides.

In the gap itself, a V between two rimrocked mesas, the scrub oak gave way to wild cherry. Johnny stopped on the summit to rest his animals and to twist a cigarette. Behind him lay New Mexico. Ahead he could see Colorado.

Las Perdidas County, Colorado! Johnny Diamond now saw it for the first time and the sight brought a grimness to his lips. He took from his pocket what seemed to be, but wasn't, a tarnished copper coin. He sat staring at it, his eyes suddenly cold and hard and his mouth bitter. He remembered back six years ago when, as a boy of fourteen, he'd first seen this tiny disk of copper. It had sickened him, then, and he'd cried like a child. At the same time it had given purpose and direction to his life.

Now, a man of twenty, he was here to fulfill that purpose. Whenever he thought of it, which was often, it changed him from a pleasant, gentle-mannered boy to a flint-hard, ruthless hunter of men.

Those he hunted were three in number. Beyond that, Johnny Diamond knew nothing about them except that they'd once lived, and might still live, in Las Perdidas County, Colorado. A county as big as an eastern state, spotted with plazas and ranches. How on all that vast range could he find three men whose names he didn't know, whose faces he'd never seen? He couldn't even be sure, after the passage of six years, that they were here at all!

He spurred Hackamore down the Colorado side of the gap. The pack mare followed lazily, dragging at her lead rope.

Again the dun snorted, slanting his ears forward as he always did when he heard oncoming horsemen. Those who came into view, heading at a fast pace uptrail, were five in number. Each was belted with a six-gun and had a carbine in his saddle scabbard. Johnny reined to a halt.

The five riders thundered up on lather-flecked mounts. One of them, a shaggy man with a cold, slablike face, sang out, "Howdy, mister. Didja pass a bunch o' range mares lately?"

"Sure did," Johnny admitted. "Forty-fifty of 'em, maybe. They went by too fast for me to read brands."

"How far ahead of us are they?"

"About ten mile by now, I'd say."

"How many men was drivin' 'em?"

"Just two," Johnny said.

The shaggy man turned to his companions. "Fog along after 'em," he directed. "When you ketch up with 'em, start throwin' lead."

Four of the riders raced on south toward the gap.

It made the situation clear to Johnny. The two he'd passed were horse thieves and these men were hot after them.

"Sorry I didn't try to stop 'em myself," Johnny said. "But I thought it was just some outfit pushin' its stuff from one range to another."

He offered makings and the shaggy man rolled himself a cigarette. "Sansone's my name," the man announced. "Top rod at the Circle D. Haven't run across you anywhere before, have I?"

"Not likely," Johnny said. "I'm new to this range. How far is it to the county seat?"

"'Bout forty-five mile. You hit the main east-and-west road at San Ysidro.

Turn west there."

"Thanks. Don't need any help, do you, handlin' those bronc rustlers?"

Sansone gave a laugh and shook his head. Although this man's manner seemed friendly enough, something about Sansone repelled Johnny. His lips made a thin cruel line and his eyes were like pale chips of ice. The man tossed back the makings and glanced at Johnny's laden pack mare.

"You can't make Las Perdidas tonight. But you can stop at Ronaldo Rivera's place on Grosella Crick. They'll be glad to put you up."

The dun horse, Hackamore, took a vicious bite at Sansone's mount. Johnny jerked him out of reach. "None of that, Hack. Folks'll think us Texans haven't got any manners." He turned to Sansone.

"Thanks. A bunk'll feel good for a change. I been campin' at water holes, lately."

"If you're stoppin' at Rivera's," Sansone advised, "you better slick back yer hair. Don Ronaldo's got the best-lookin' gal on this range. I'll be foggin' along now." He loped south after his men.

Johnny proceeded on in the opposite direction. He came out of the foothills at the edge of a wide, level prairie. The trail presently joined an east-and-west road and here lay an old and jaded adobe plaza. San Ysidro.

There was only one street, ankle-deep in dust. A saloon, a general store, a barbershop and pool hall. A row of mud shacks. Johnny heard the distant pounding of a hammer on an anvil.

He dismounted at the store and went in for tobacco. A Mexican woman waited on him. Outside again, he saw half a dozen cow ponies tied at the saloon. Two were branded Circle D and four had a Lazy M.

An odd thought struck Johnny. Since five Circle D punchers were chasing horse thieves, why would two other Circle D men be loafing here at a saloon? Why weren't they also in the chase?

It was no particular concern of Johnny's. Shadows were long and he'd better push on to the next creek. He remembered the tip from Sansone. That he could stop overnight at the ranch of a man named Ronaldo Rivera. Presumably it was right on his way to the county seat.

Sansone had referred to him as "Don Ronaldo," which suggested a *hacendado* of some importance. Johnny wanted to know people of importance and especially people who'd been settled on this range for a long time. Gringos were likely to be either newcomers or drifters, but a Mexican hidalgo would, almost certainly, be an old-timer here. And since Johnny was chasing a six-year-old clue, only citizens who'd lived on this range at least that long could by any remote chance be of help to him.

Boots came clumping up the walk. Johnny turned and saw a man with a round amiable face.

"Hi," Johnny said. "Can you tell me how far it is to the Rivera layout?"

"Sure can, young fella." The man pointed west along the road. "Two hours at a slow jog'll put you there. Right where the road crosses Grosella Crick. You aim to stop overnight there?"

"If they'll put me up," Johnny said.

The man smiled. "They'll put you up, all right. He's an okay hombre, the senator is."

"Senator, did you say?"

"Sure. I supposed you knew that. Don Ronaldo's been state senator from

this district since '76. And will be as long as he lives, I'm bettin'. Gets all the Mex vote, and pulls most of the gringo vote too. I always vote for him myself."

"Is he home now?"

"Yep. And his casa'll be yours the minute you knock on the door."

"Thanks. I'm Johnny Diamond from Texas, case I ever see you again."

"I'm Buck Perry of the Lazy M, down this crick a piece." A thought struck Perry and he added, "Since you're headin' fer Don Ronaldo's, you might as well take him a message from José Pacheco."

"Who's José Pacheco and what's his message?"

"José's the blacksmith here." Perry thumbed toward the far end of the street. A little while ago Johnny had heard a hammering on an anvil in that direction, but the sound had stopped.

"I left my bronc there to be shod," Perry explained, "and José asked me if I aimed to ride by Don Ronaldo's place tonight. He wanted to send a message there. I said I wasn't goin' that way. So José said he'd send it by someone else."

"I'll take it," Johnny offered promptly.

Buck Perry went along to show him the way to Pacheco's shop. It was the last adobe on the street.

They turned in at the smithy.

"Criminy!" Perry froze at the entrance, and so did Johnny Diamond.

José Pacheco lay prone beside his forge. A horseshoe, still pink from heat, lay on the anvil. One of Pacheco's outstretched hands held a hammer, the other a pair of tongs. Blood stained the man's leather apron. His face had the waxen cast of death.

Buck Perry and Johnny Diamond ran to him. The body, with a bullet hole through the heart, was still warm.

"I was talkin' to him not more'n twenty minutes ago." Perry turned his shocked face to Johnny. "Howcome we didn't hear the shot?"

The answer, Johnny thought, was clear enough. Clarion sound as Pacheco pounded his hammer on the anvil! No one down the street would have heard a shot. The place had an open back door, through which the killer had retreated unseen.

Chapter Two

Rancho

BUCK PERRY took charge until the sheriff could be brought from Las Perdidas. Four of Perry's riders were at the saloon and he dispatched one of them on a fast ride to the county seat. The others he deputized to make a list of all men known to be in San Ysidro at the hour of the shot.

"It happened a few minutes before five, Slim. Count noses. And guns. Chances are the guy slipped right up the crick bed to the back door of the cantina. Or mebbe to the pool hall. Then again he might've forked a bronc and lit out fer the mesas."

Johnny helped investigate the last possibility. Cottonwoods and wild plum along the creek would have given ample screen to the killer's retreat. If so, he was safe from pursuit. Many head of stock had watered at the creek, scarring its banks with innumerable hoofprints.

Perry, taking a late supper with Johnny at the cantina, had a discour-

aged look. "We've counted noses and we've counted guns. Present in the plaza at time of shot, seventeen gun-wearing males. Of these, nine are ranch hands loafing around the saloon, pool hall, cantina, or barbershop. A minute's all it would take for anyone to let fly with a slug and then slip back to where he was a little while before. No one can swear just who walked out and in and just when. I'll sure be glad to dump this in Ad's lap."

"Ad's the sheriff?" Johnny inquired.

"Yeh, Adam Sawyer. And Ad's nobody's fool, either. Not much to look at, Ad ain't. But smart as a whip."

There was a rentable bed up over the cantina but Johnny didn't like the looks of it. He took his animals down below the road and made camp under a creek cottonwood. Rolled in his blankets there he looked up at the stars and wondered. About a message which Pacheco had wanted sent to Don Ronaldo Rivera. Was that why he'd been killed? A simple plaza blacksmith, José Pacheco, with no known enemies. A peaceful man who'd never harmed anyone. Yet all of a sudden, a bullet through his heart.

Had someone wanted to silence José before he could send certain information to an influential citizen of his own race? Johnny could think of no other motive. A blacksmith, serving customers from all over the range, might learn things. He could come upon a fact which needed to be passed along to a high authority like Ronaldo Rivera.

Johnny had just finished breakfast next morning when he saw a band of loose horses being driven down the plaza street. They came loping across the road with five cowboys driving them. One of these, Sansone of the Circle D, pulled up at Johnny's camp.

"I see you caught up with those rustlers," Johnny said.

Sansone made a sour grimace. "No such luck. They seen us comin' and took to the hills. Chased 'em till dark, then lost 'em in the brush. So we came back and picked up the mares. We're hazin' 'em home, now, to the Circle D."

"Circle D's down this creek, is it?"

Sansone nodded. "Yeh, right where it hits the Picketwire River." He loped on down the San Ysidro to overtake his men.

Johnny walked up to the general store and found Buck Perry there. The storekeeper and his family had blank looks. "We know nothing, señor. José was a man of peace and our good friend."

"Did he have any relatives?" Perry prodded.

"A married daughter who lives at Thacker, señor. Only last Sunday José went there to visit her."

Johnny asked, "Do you know what message José wanted sent to Ronaldo Rivera?"

"He does not speak to us about a message, señor."

Johnny went outside with Buck Perry. "Nothin' we can do now," Perry muttered, "'cept wait fer the sheriff."

"They said José had a daughter at Thacker. Where's that?"

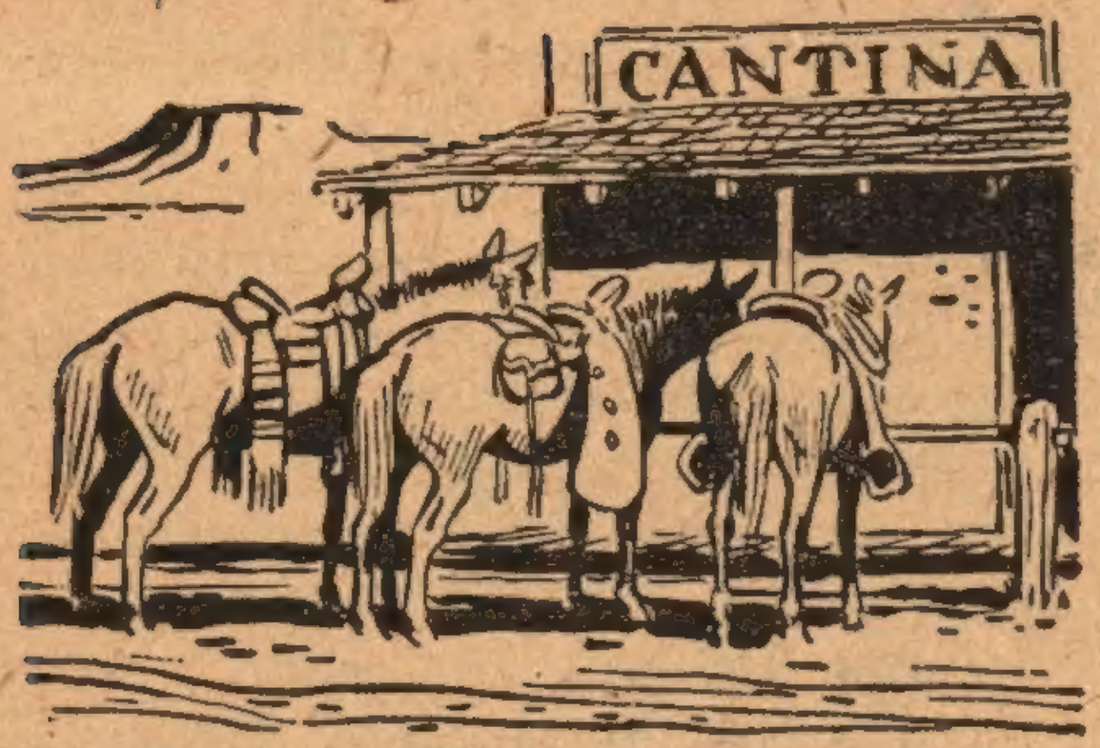
"Thirty-odd mile due north on the main line of the railroad. Just a whistle stop."

"Anything between here and there?"

"Nothin' but a million acres of grama sod and about fifteen thousand head o' cattle."

"What brands?"

"Mostly Rick Sherwood's Circle D, Ronaldo Rivera's Bar L, and my Lazy M. A few shoe-stringers run in there too."



It was noontime before Sheriff Adam Sawyer arrived. He came loping up on a blaze-faced sorrel. Ad Sawyer was tall and thin, black-visaged, with a bony, angular face of almost Lincolnian homeliness. An alert shrewdness gleamed from his deep-set, piercing eyes. Nothing but his spurred boots marked him as a rangeman. If he carried a gun it was somewhere under his long black coat.

He swung to the walk and confronted Perry.

"Let's have it, Buck."

Perry presented Johnny Diamond and explained how the two of them had found José Pacheco. "He wanted a message sent to Senator Rivera," Buck finished. "About what, we don't know."

Adam Sawyer stroked the sharp angles of his chin for a moment, then whirled and crossed to the saloon. In a moment they heard him barking questions at customers there.

"He'll shake everybody down," Perry said. "And lyin' to Ad Sawyer ain't easy."

For more than two hours they watched Sawyer stride from house to house in the plaza, checking alibis, sifting for every possible scrap of information. Late in the afternoon Johnny grew impatient. He sought Sawyer out to ask, "If you don't need me for anything, Mr. Sheriff, what about me ridin' on?"

Sawyer gave him an oddly calculating look. "You're from Lampasas, Texas, and you're on your way to Las Perdidas."

The abrupt statement puzzled Johnny. How did the man know?

"That's right, Mr. Sheriff."

"I haven't time to talk to you now," Sawyer said. "But look me up tomorrow at my courthouse office. I want to give you some advice."

He turned sharply to his duties. Johnny, confused, crossed the road to his camp to pack and be on his way. He could get as far as the Rivera ranch by sundown and stop overnight there.

Then he recalled a remark of Sansone's. Don Ronaldo had a good-looking daughter. The thought inspired Johnny to change his shirt and shave.

Once he was shaven, with a black silk shirt and bandanna to match, and with his wavy, sun-bleached hair carefully brushed back with a deep part on the left, Johnny Diamond didn't cut a bad figure. In repose his face was strong, purposeful, at times gallant.

He took off his gun belt and wrapped it in the pack. It wouldn't be polite to ride up to a peaceful hacienda wearing a gun. But a carbine was in his saddle scabbard as he swung aboard Hackamore.

The road led almost due west, paralleling a line of box mesas along the Colorado-New Mexico border. And here on the flats the grass looked good to Johnny. Mostly it was bunch grass and grama, with here and there a spot of bluestem in the swales.

As Johnny progressed, the mesas on his left loomed higher and higher. A sheer palisade of rimrocks fringed their tops. From successive rincons of

the mesas came creeks, all flowing northeasterly to join the Picketwire River. Johnny passed grazing cattle, three brands predominating: Circle D; Bar L; Lazy M. Once he saw the dust of antelope on the run.

He crossed McBride Creek and some six miles farther on sighted another creekline ahead. It reached from a crack in the mountain, crossing this road at right angles. Alfalfa meadows flanked it for miles. On a slight eminence just this side of it stood what at first seemed to be an adobe town.

Johnny turned into the street and saw that it was just a big Mexican rancho. These adobes were the peon quarters. The master's house stood at the far end, against a cottonwood grove, circled by a plastered adobe wall painted robin's egg blue. There were barns, corrals, a steepled church, a two-story bodega with a pulley well in front of it. All made a quadrangle alive with chickens, burros, and fat little brown *niños* at play.

The adult population in sight was clustered at a roundpen corral below the main barn, where a shouting applause in Spanish indicated a bronco was being ridden.

Johnny Diamond rode to the corral and dismounted. Standing outside of it, and observing with approval the show within, was one who could only be Don Ronaldo Rivera himself. A smallish thin gentleman of poise and dignity, with a goatee at his chin, and with a *cigaritta* between his aristocratic lips.

All his attention, at the moment, was on a pitching horse in the roundpen. Seated on the top rail on all sides were vaqueros, cheering the horse on, predicting a quick spill for the rider. But the rider stuck. He was a gringo redhead not much older than Johnny himself.

"Caramba! Que diablo!" yelled the gallery.

It was a nice exhibition. The redhead held the reins high, fanning with a sombrero in his free hand.

When it was over, Don Ronaldo Rivera turned and saw Johnny.

"Señor?" he greeted politely.

Johnny had a winning smile and used it. "My name's Diamond. On my way to Perdidas. I'm wonderin' if you got an extra bunk at the bunkshack where I could—"

"*Por supuesto.* You will make yourself at home, señor."

"Thanks," Johnny said. "I've ridden all the way from south Texas and a sod bed gets kinda hard, sometimes. You're Senator Rivera, I take it?"

"That is true, señor. At your service."

"Then maybe there's somethin' I oughta tell you. It happened yesterday as I came through San Ysidro." Johnny proceeded to tell about the killing of a blacksmith named Pacheco. "He had a message for you, Senator. First he asked Buck Perry to bring it but Perry wasn't coming this way. So I offered to bring it myself but I was too late. Nobody knows what the message was."

Don Ronaldo was shocked. "José Pacheco!" he exclaimed in genuine grief. "He was my friend. *El pobrecito!*" He clapped his hands and called out, "Miguel. *Apurese!*"

His *mayor domo* came on the run. "*Mira*, Miguel. *Que triste!* Our friend José Pacheco, *el herrero de* San Ysidro, has been murdered. You will go there at once, Miguel, and arrange for his funeral. It must have many candles and the expense will be mine." These and other instructions erupted from

Don Ronaldo in rapid Spanish.

He then called a boy, directing him to stall and feed Johnny's horses. "You yourself, señor, will be my guest at *comida*."

He linked an arm in Johnny's and led him to the main house. An elderly servant admitted them. They entered a *sala* with tinted walls and a puncheon floor. An organ stood at one end. At the other end a fireplace had two formal, high-backed chairs in front of it. Candlelight showed carved wooden saints recessed into the walls. "Wine for our guest," murmured Don Ronaldo.

The *mozo* brought wine. The host pushed an open box of *cigarittas* toward Johnny.

"Now you will tell me more," the senator entreated, "about poor José Pacheco."

"Nothin' more to tell," Johnny said, "except we sent for the sheriff and he's there right now shaking everybody down. Some think the killer never left the plaza. Others claim he's some outlaw who high-tailed to the mesas. Me, all I got's a hunch I can't prove."

"A hunch, señor?"

"It's that somebody didn't want Pacheco to send you that message."

Rivera puffed daintily at his *cigaritta*. "In the mesas," he said, "there are many *ladrones*. Often they drive away my cattle. Perhaps José learned of a guilt and wished to send me word."

"Speakin' of *ladrones*, I passed a couple of 'em drivin' a bunch of Circle D mares. Some Circle D men caught up with 'em and brought the stock back. The rustlers got away, though."

Rivera sighed. "Always they get away."

In a moment he glanced at the mantel clock, rang for a *mozo*, and inquired, "Have the young ladies returned yet?"

"*Todavia, no, patron.*"

"We will hold supper for them," the master directed. To Johnny he explained, "My daughter has a guest, her cousin from Las Perdidas. Today they rode up into the canyon to pick berries."

He moved to a window which looked southward toward the mesa. Johnny took a stand beside him.

Directly under the window lay a little lake, a perfect oval a furlong in length and half as wide, giant cottonwoods spaced evenly around its perimeter. At the far end of the lake stood the ranch church. The quiet beauty of it charmed Johnny Diamond.

"There they come!" his host exclaimed. Two young ladies could be seen loping toward them. "They are fine *muchachas*, señor, full of life and laughter. They will be glad to have your company." He chuckled. "But we should balance the party. *Two* señoritas should have *two* cavaliers." Again he summoned a *mozo*. "Pablo, you will request Señor Wiggins to dine with us at the house."

The *mozo* went out. "Señor Wiggins," the senator explained, "is *el colorado* who breaks horses for me."

Johnny grinned. The redhead! How thoughtful of Don Ronaldo! Two ladies. Two cowboys. A gracious host and dinner for five.

The two girls galloped into the ranch yard. Back of them rode a *mozo* with a basket of wild raspberries. The young ladies themselves, although both dark, didn't look at all alike. Johnny could hardly believe they were cousins. One was vividly Spanish, the other definitely gringo. The Spanish

girl rode a sidesaddle and wore a long, sweeping skirt. The gringo girl rode astride, in corded pants and doeskin jacket. She swung to the ground with the grace of a rodeo rider. The Spanish girl let the *mozo* help her dismount.

They came into the house and Johnny saw at once that the Spanish girl was easily the more beautiful. Yet it was her tall, free-limbed cousin who drew, and held, the quick interest of Johnny Diamond. The one was all curves and softness and shy smiles; the other, as hipless as a boy, had glow and vigor and an exciting personality.

Don Ronaldo presented them. "My niece, Florence; and my daughter, Felicia. My guest, Señor Johnny Diamond."

The niece gave him a frank, quizzical appraisal. "From Texas?" she inquired.

Johnny nodded. But how did she know? Did all Texans look alike?

Felicia murmured a welcome and then the girls disappeared to change for *comida*. A moment later Chuck Wiggins, his red hair sleeked back and his face shining, arrived from the bunkhouse.

When the girls reappeared, each in evening dress, the promptness with which Chuck Wiggins attached himself to Felicia left Johnny no choice. He offered an arm to Florence.

The dining *sala* was in a separate house. To reach it they had to cross a wide open patio where paper lanterns hung from neatly trimmed box elders. An ancient sheep dog came up as they passed, and Florence gave it a pat on the head. Stars were out by now, the light shimmering on the little lake beyond. From the bank of it came the strumming of a guitar.

Don Ronaldo led them into a building of two rooms, one a kitchen, the other a dining *sala*. Supper was of *cazuela* and roast grouse and during it the senator, in courtesy to his guest, directed the talk in English.

"You must tell them about poor José Pacheco, señor. *Que triste!*"

So Johnny retold the tragedy of San Ysidro. Felicia's sensitive face showed shock. "Have they sent," she asked, "for Uncle Adam?"

The senator nodded and Johnny sensed the truth. Adam Sawyer, the sheriff! If he was Felicia's uncle, he must be Florence's father.

Felicia turned troubled eyes to Don Ronaldo. "This message José wanted to send you! Could it concern Ernesto?"

The senator's brow clouded. "Let us not speak of Ernesto."

A silence fell over the table. Who, Johnny wondered, was Ernesto?

Chapter Three

A Pair of Boots

LATER, in the patio, Chuck Wiggins made his own personal objective quite clear. The absorbing interest of his life, Johnny could see, was Felicia Rivera. It explained why this redhead had taken a job here, as horse tamer, on a Mexican ranch.

Don Ronaldo, leaving youth to amuse youth, retired to his study. And presently Chuck Wiggins inveigled Felicia inside to play and sing at the organ for him. Under the mellow light of lanterns, Johnny lingered in the patio with Flo Sawyer.

Quite suddenly she said, "You're not at all like I thought you'd be, Johnny

Diamond."

It confused him. How could she have known of his existence?

"I expected," she explained with a cryptic smile, "that you'd be hard-eyed and glowering and sullen."

"What made you think that?"

"You saw my father at San Ysidro. Didn't he tell you?"

"Only that he wanted me to report at his office in town. He said he had some free advice."

"He received a letter from the sheriff at Lampasas, Texas. It said you were on your way here. On some mission of revenge. My father disapproves of revenge. He thinks it's an ugly motive." A coolness came to Flo's voice as she added, "And so do I."

Resentment flushed Johnny. "It's a free country," he said stiffly.

"That is true," she agreed. "But I still agree with my father. He will advise you to drop this revenge mission of yours and go back to where you came from."

"What else," Johnny demanded, "did the letter say?"

"It said a Texas ranch was raided six years ago. An entire family was wiped out with the exception of a fourteen-year-old boy. The boy grew up and when he was twenty he found a clue to the background of the raiders. It made him think they'd come originally from this Colorado county. So he loaded his guns and set out on a seven-hundred-mile ride to find them."

"What's wrong with that?" Johnny challenged.

"It's taking the law into your own hands, isn't it? If we all did that, there'd be chaos on every street corner."

Johnny's jaw set stubbornly. "Chaos! That's exactly what I found when I got home from school one night, six years ago, and saw hot ashes where the ranch house had been. The stock all driven off. My father and my brothers shot dead! How would you like it yourself?"

Her voice softened. "I wouldn't like it. And I feel awfully sorry for you, Johnny Diamond. But unlicensed, personal vengeance isn't the answer. We have peace officers to handle things like that."

"I waited six years," Johnny retorted, "for peace officers to handle it. They handled it by concluding it was a raid by Comanche Indians. But I don't figure it was Indians."

"Why?"

"Tracks showed there were just three of them. Indians don't raid in three-man gangs. And I got other reasons for thinkin' it was three white men, and that one of 'em came from Las Perdidas."

"Very well," Flo Sawyer agreed. "Suppose you're right. Then why don't you just show your evidence to my father, the sheriff here?"

An interruption came in the courteous voice of Don Ronaldo Rivera. "With your permission, señor. Flo, guests have arrived to see you and Felicia. The Señores Sherwood and Cranston. They await in the *sala*."

Flo stood up, and seemed thankful for the interruption.

"Yes, Uncle Ronald. Felicia and I were expecting them."

Her uncle said to Johnny, "They are friends and neighbors. You must come in and meet them."

Johnny followed them into the *sala* where he found Chuck Wiggins looking glum.

"Looks like they're all dated up," the redhead whispered.

The two arrivals were presented as Rick Sherwood, owner of the Circle D, and Val Cranston. Sherwood looked thirty, Cranston a trifle older. Of the two, Sherwood was the more personable. He had height and dignity. His chin was deeply cleft, his eyes slate-gray and penetrating. He wore tailor-made corduroys, the double-breasted coat fitting snugly over his broad sloping shoulders. His mouth had a self-willed set, Johnny thought. The other man, Cranston, lacked Sherwood's assurance. He was softer, less virile, less aggressive, not born to the saddle as was Sherwood.

Sherwood's date was clearly with Flo, and Cranston's with Felicia.

Chuck Wiggins drew Johnny aside. "Look, pal," he whispered. "Four's company and six is a crowd. Those guys got our time beat, for tonight anyway. Reckon we better shag our carcasses down to the bunkhouse."

Johnny nodded. He thanked Senator Rivera and said his good-bys. "I've been a long time in the saddle, so I'll be turnin' in."

"Our house is yours," Rivera said warmly. "You must visit us again."

Johnny's last word was with Flo. "I'll look you up in town some time, if it's all right."

"Of course," she agreed, but her tone wasn't encouraging.

Johnny himself wondered why he'd even want to see her again. If he did, she'd probably give him another lecture. And as for looks, she couldn't hold a candle to Felicia.

Outside, Wiggins guided him to the bunkhouse. It was a long, adobe affair, with a recreation room where a half-dozen Mexican vaqueros were playing cards. In a room beyond, Chuck pointed out a bunk for Johnny. Then the two went out on the steps and lighted cigarettes.

Organ music from the main house depressed the redhead. "And just when I thought I was gettin' somewhere!" he mourned.

Johnny smiled. "Do they come often?"

"Cranston does. Sherwood don't because Flo's generally in town. Flo keeps books for her old man at the courthouse."

"How big is the Circle D?"

"Biggest spread in the county. And they say Rick Sherwood started out with nothin' but a dugout in a sand bank. A smart cookie, Rick is."

"And Cranston?"

"He's state brand inspector for this district. He has to be on hand at the loadin'-pens every time anyone ships out cattle. Senator Rivera got the appointment for him."

"How long you been around this range, Chuck?"

"Four-five years, I reckon. Why?"

"Did you ever see a man wearing a pair of boots with a gilt design around the tops like this?" Johnny took an envelope from his pocket and made a sketch. It showed a row of three diamonds with the corners slightly overlapping.

Wiggins looked at the sketch. "Linked Diamonds? Is that a cow brand?"

"Used to be," Johnny told him. "My dad used it a long time ago in Texas. Just before he died, he had a pair of fancy riding-boots made to order. They were just like any other cowboy boots except they had these linked diamonds etched in gilt around the tops."

"Never noticed any boots like that," Wiggins said. "Howcome you wanta know?"

Johnny told Chuck about the raid

six years ago down in deep Texas. "I was just a kid. My dad and my two older brothers made me go to school in town five days a week. Saturdays I'd ride to the ranch to do chores over the week-end. I got home one Saturday morning and found 'em dead. The buildings had been burned to the ground and the stock driven away."

Chuck swore softly. "That was sure rough, pal."

"My dad had sold some cattle and hadn't banked the cash yet. The raiders took it. Dad lay on his back in the ranch yard with a bullet through his heart. He was in his sock feet."

Wiggins blinked. "You mean one of the raiders swiped his boots?"

"Must have. The boots were gone. Then the raider did something else to Dad. He took two copper pennies from his pocket and laid 'em on Dad's eyes. Maybe for a laugh. Maybe for spite. Or maybe because he was superstitious. Anyway that's how I found my father. I was only fourteen. It made me so crazy mad I snatched those pennies away and threw 'em as far as I could. Then I rode to Lampasas and told the sheriff."

Wiggins twisted another cigarette. "So ever since then, you been lookin' for a man wearin' those boots. But they'd be wore out by now, wouldn't they, after six years?"

"If you keep renewin' the heels and soles, you can make a good pair of boots last a long time."

"But why would they be up here in Colorado?"

"My home was gone," Johnny said. "So I took a job on the next ranch and worked there six years. Sundays I'd go over to the old place and poke around. And just this spring I found somethin'. Looked like two copper coins. They were buried in the dust, and tarnished, about fifty yards from where I found my father that time. I'd thrown them as far as I could, remember? One of 'em was a penny and the other was just a penny-size disk of copper. Not a coin at all. That raid was at nighttime. I figure the man thought he was fishing two pennies from his pocket. But one of 'em was this."

Johnny produced from his own pocket a coinlike disk which he'd polished until it was now quite bright. He showed it to Chuck Wiggins. On one side of it was printed: *The Picketwire Bar, Las Perdidas, Colo.* The other side said: *Good for one beer.*

"A beer check!" exclaimed Wiggins. "Many a time I've been in that Picketwire bar. It's the oldest saloon in town."

"It must've been operating in 1878," Johnny said, "six years ago. A customer picked up a beer check there. He went to Texas with two other men and made a raid or two. Maybe he came back here to his old stamping grounds, and maybe he didn't. But it's the only lead I've got. So I'm running it down."

"Chances are he *did* aim to come back," Wiggins guessed, "or he wouldn't've hung on to that bar check so long. But he could be dead by now. Or he could be runnin' with some gang of outlaws up in the mesas. Any way you look at it, he's a needle in a haystack."

Johnny admitted it. "If he came back, he brought those boots along with him. He could be wearin' 'em right now. All I want is an even break with him."

"You need any help," Chuck assured him with a warm sympathy, "just call on me."

AN AFTERNOON LATER Johnny got quite a different reaction when he faced Sheriff Adam Sawyer in an office at the Las Perdidas courthouse. Sawyer listened to Johnny's story and looked at the bar check. His eyes were stern.

"I can't blame you for feeling bitter about this, young man. It was a raw deal for a fourteen-year-old kid. But you're a man now. And a man ought to have better sense than you're showing."

Johnny flushed. "You've no call to talk that way, Sheriff."

"I've a call to stop unauthorized man hunts," Sawyer snapped. "In the first place, you haven't got a chance to find your man or men. One of them, let's admit, passed through this town more than six years ago and accumulated a bar check. We don't know that he ever really lived here. Even if he did, we don't know that he ever came back. And even if he did come back, what have you got? Nothing but a pair of boots the man probably wore out and threw away three or four years ago."

Johnny's jaw squared. "There's no law against lookin' for him."

"Right. But there's a law against shooting him down when you find him. That's your plan, I take it?"

"He'll get an even break," Johnny said.

Sawyer glowered. "Bosh! That even-break business gives me a pain. It may legalize killings on some ranges, but not on mine. You're out on a crusade of personal vengeance. Forget it and go home. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' Which means it isn't yours, Johnny Diamond."

Johnny had a rebellious look when he went out. He didn't like being preached to. First the sheriff's daughter. And now the sheriff himself. Talking to him like he was a renegade schoolboy! Maybe he couldn't find those raiders. But nobody could talk him out of trying.

He walked to the corner of Main and Commercial and stood there, watching the life of the town. It wasn't a gun-toting town. An ordinance stipulated that side arms must be checked by men coming in from the range. Johnny's gun was still rolled in his pack, which he'd left with his two horses at a livery barn.

Traffic streamed by in Main Street. Adobe and pine-board stores flanked it. Spurred boots thumped along the plank walks. Tin-panny music issued from the saloons.

Johnny paid small attention to faces. He looked at boots. Cowboys, merchants, miners, gamblers, busy men and idle men, were tramping or riding by. *A needle in a haystack*, Johnny thought morosely.

Five blocks down Commercial, in the trough of the town, he heard a train come in. The depot of the Santa Fe railroad was there, right where Commercial Street crossed the river. The rails had arrived here in 1878, they'd told him, the very year of the raid in Texas. Which made Johnny's quest seem all the more hopeless. For during rail construction a legion of drifters and grafters would have been here. Any one of them could have picked up a beer check at the Picketwire Bar and gone outlawing down Texas way. Such a drifter would have no reason to return here.

A buckboard, drawn by matched trotters, came whirling down Main. A *mozo* from the Rivera ranch was driving it and on the seat by him was Flo Sawyer. As she went by Johnny took off his hat and waved. She didn't see him. The buckboard turned uphill toward the better residential section of town.

Later a dusty horseman pulled up and dismounted. Johnny recognized his round amiable face and stubbled chin. "Hi, Mr. Perry. Anything new out your way?"

Buck Perry popped dust from his gloves and shook his head. "Ad Sawyer turned the plaza inside out," he reported, "and couldn't find a thing. Looks like Pacheco's killer got clean away with it."

"Somebody said Sawyer used to be a lawyer. Howcome he turned sheriff?"

"He was practicin' law down in New Mex, twenty-odd years ago, when he married Elena Rivera. She was a sister of Ronaldo Rivera. We had a crime wave up this way a few years back, when the railroad came in, and we needed a smart sheriff. So Rivera persuaded his brother-in-law to come up and take over."

"Is his wife still living?"

"Nope. Both the sheriff and the senator are widowers now. Havin' daughters the same age, they get along fine together. I guess I better check this gun before I get pinched."

They crossed to the Toltec Hotel where Johnny already had a room. Buck Perry drew a forty-five from his belt and checked it at the desk. He hurried out, then, and Johnny went on up to his room.

The room had a bare floor and raw pine walls. There was a cot and a bench seat. Johnny's slicker roll lay on the cot. He unwrapped it and took out a pair of boots.

They were handsome, shiny boots which had never been worn. Just before leaving Lampasas Johnny had had them made to order by the same bootmaker who, long ago, had supplied his father with a similar pair. Linked diamonds, in gilt lines, circled the boot tops.

Johnny removed his old footwear and put on the new. He tucked his trousers in, leaving the boot tops exposed. Spurless, he went out and walked north down Commercial. The Picketwire Bar, they'd told him, was near the bridge where this street crossed the river.

He found it there, a shabby old place with cracked mud walls. Ranch ponies were tethered in front and next door was a barbershop with a bootblack stand on the walk.

Johnny went into the bar and ordered ginger ale. The bartender had drooping mustaches and looked Irish. Johnny clinked the old copper beer check on the bar. "Do you still pass these out?"

The Irishman squinted curiously. "Nope, not in my time. But I only took the place over coupla years back. Where'd yuh get holt of that thing?"

"Down in Texas," Johnny said. He put the copper check back in his pocket. "By the way, does a customer ever come in here wearin' boots like mine?"

The man peered down at Johnny's boots. "Nope, don't recollect ever seein' any boots like that. Whatsamatter? You had a pair of boots stole?"

"Yeh," Johnny said. "It was a long time ago. The boots'd be old and scuffed by now."

He went out to the walk and found the bootblack's chair empty. Johnny

mounted it and bought a shine. The man who served him was an elderly Mexican. "They are new, señor. They need no polish so I shall just brush them a little."

"Ever have a customer with boots like 'em? I mean old boots with the same design around the tops."

"I do not remember any, señor."

"Any other shine stands in town?"

"There is one in the depot. And one in a pool hall on Elm Street."

"What about cobblers? I mean places where you could get a half sole or new heels."

The man named three such places. Johnny tipped him and went on. He spent the rest of the afternoon covering the places named. It was fruitless. No bootblack or cobbler could remember boots like Johnny's.

He checked with the clerk at the hotel to make certain there were no other shine stands around town.

"That's all of them," the clerk said. "But you'll find one down at Chico. Chico has a shoemaker too."

"Where's Chico?"

"Four miles down the river. The narrow-gauge from Denver comes in there. A wide-open town, Chico is. Tough, I mean."

Chapter Four

Above Suspicion

IN THE morning Johnny took Hackamore out of the livery barn and rode four miles down the Picketwire. When he came opposite the Chico plaza, he forded the river and rode into a shabby street. The place seemed to be about one-third the size of Las Perdidas but with about three times as much vice in sight. Johnny saw a half-dozen honkytonks featuring games and women. Men lounging on the walks looked like the off-scourings of the range.

Johnny found a more sober part of town when he turned a corner. An older section built of adobe bricks, with shops and cantinas and a pepper tree or two.

Here Johnny found the one cobbler of Chico, a stolid little man of Germanic features. Johnny drew a blank when he asked about the boots.

"Who does the shoeshining around here?"

"He is Frankie Valdez," the man said. "At the barber's you will find him."

The barbershop was a one-chair establishment. A customer there lay back with his face lathered. An Italian barber was shaving him. A shine stand was on the walk outside. The shine man was dozing and Johnny had to shake him awake.

"Rub the dust off these boots."

"It is a pleasure, señor." Frankie Valdez was a thin little Mexican with the eyes of a ferret.

"Ever see any boots like these? Old ones, I mean. Linked diamonds around the tops."

The small eyes narrowed a bit. "Why is it you ask, señor?"

"I'm chasing a *ladron*. All I know about him is he once had boots like mine."

"Are you a sheriff, señor? Is there a reward?"

"I'm not a sheriff," Johnny said. "And there's no reward. But I'd pay ten pesos out of my own poke."

"Ten pesos if I remember boots like your own, señor?"

"My name's Diamond and I'm at the Toltec in Las Perdidas. Think hard, Frankie. If you can remember, bring the tip to me and I'll pay you the ten pesos."

Frankie licked his lips and looked both ways along the street. "At the moment I can think of no one, señor. If I do, I will come to your hotel for the ten pesos."

"Do that," Johnny said dryly.

He concluded that this sly little scamp was on the make. He might show up with a false tip merely to collect the ten dollars. It would be easy enough, and without risk. He could name a man no longer living and claim that such a customer had once come to him for a shine.

That seemed to exhaust the possibilities of Chico and Johnny rode back upriver to Las Perdidas. He left Hackamore at the livery barn and walked down Commercial to his hotel.

A saddle horse tied in front of it stopped him. The horse was young, looked like he might have Morgan blood, and had four white stockings reaching to the knees. There was a white star in the forehead. Otherwise the horse was mouse-colored.

Johnny's pulse quickened. He circled the animal, looking closely at the markings. The brand was Circle D. There was no vented brand. Johnny opened the beast's mouth for a look at the teeth. Four years old.

In the lobby Johnny spoke to the desk clerk. "Does a guest here own that mousey horse out there?" The mount could be seen through the front window.

"There he sits," the clerk said. He pointed to a guest who was seated on the lobby divan reading a newspaper.

Johnny went to him. The man lowered his paper and looked up with a smile. "Hello," he said. "Met you out at the Rivera ranch, didn't I?"

Val Cranston, the brand inspector! An appointee of Senator Rivera himself. And a leading candidate, according to Chuck Wiggins, for the favor of Felicia.

"I was admirin' that bronc of yours out there," Johnny said. "A Morgan, isn't he? Raise him yourself?"

Cranston gave him a blank look. "No. I bought him a year ago from the Circle D. Why? Want to trade me out of him?"

Johnny shook his head. "I just got an eye for a good horse, that's all. It's not often you see markings like that."

He noticed that Cranston was evading his eyes. The man looked to the left, then to the right, then down. Looking down, his gaze fell on Johnny's boots.

Sight of them seemed to spellbind Val Cranston. And to startle him. When he looked up again, his plump face was a shade less rubicund.

"What's the matter?" Johnny prodded.

"Nothing," Cranston said as he brought out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

I've hit something, Johnny thought. *Something I wasn't looking for.*

Johnny went out and hurried to the courthouse. The sheriff's office door was open and Johnny found Adam Sawyer at his desk. The girl at a smaller desk, making entries in a ledger, was Flo.

"Howdy," Johnny said. "You folks busy?"

Adam Sawyer laid down a quill pen. His smile had no welcome in it. "Not at all," he said with heavy irony. "What with an unsolved murder on our hands,

and a dozen reports about missing cattle all over the county, we've nothing to worry us at all. What's on your mind, young man?"

"Boots. Boots like these, only old ones." Johnny looked down at his own.

The sheriff's eyes fixed on the linked-diamonds design. So did Flo's. "I had 'em made," Johnny explained, "to match the ones swiped by those raiders six years ago."

"For what purpose?"

"I showed 'em to every shoemaker in town here. Did the same at the shine stands. Both here and at Chico."

"Any results?"

"None," Johnny admitted.

"Naturally," Sawyer echoed dryly. "That trail's too cold."

"But I ran onto somethin' else, Sheriff. A mouse-colored horse."

"What mouse-colored horse?" Sawyer's tone was impatient.

"Those Lampasas raiders ran off our stock," Johnny said, "includin' an eight-year-old brood mare. She was a good breeder and had been bringing us a colt every year. The colts were always marked exactly like she was. Mouse-colored all over, except for four white stockings, knee-high, and a white star in the forehead."

"Did the raiders run off her colts too?" This inquiry came briskly from Flo.

"No," Johnny told her. "The colts, with our Linked Diamonds brand on 'em, had been sold before the raid. But the mare herself, if she's still living, could have had five more colts since then."

"You mean you've found such a colt on this range?" asked Sawyer.

"That's it," Johnny said. "Tied right in front of my hotel. A four-year-old with those same markings. It's branded Circle D."

"If it's a Circle D," Sawyer concluded with decision, "it's an honest horse. Rick Sherwood runs the Circle D. And take my word for it, young man, he's completely trustworthy."

"He doesn't own the horse now. It belongs to Val Cranston."

The sheriff gave him a piercing stare. "See here, young man, you're barking up the wrong tree. Cranston's our local brand inspector. What are you trying to start, anyway? A witch hunt? Color doesn't prove anything. There must be thousands of mouse-colored mares in the world."

"Ours," Johnny said stubbornly, "had Morgan blood. So does this bronc of Cranston's."

Sawyer's annoyance mounted. "I own a Morgan horse myself," he said sharply. "So do lots of people."

"All I want, Sheriff, is a check on it."

"And just how, young man, would you do that? You say this colt is only four years old. And the raid was six years ago."

"I want you to take a look at the Circle D range herd and see if there's a fourteen-year-old mouse-colored Morgan mare in it. With four white stockings. If there is, see if there's a blotted brand alongside the Circle D. If you can't read through the blot, you could shoot the mare and skin her. The blotted brand would show on the underside of the skin."

Flo Sawyer had a shocked look. "Are you suggesting," she challenged, "that Rick Sherwood could have been one of those raiders?"

Adam Sawyer echoed her tone. "Sherwood's highly respected all over this county. Often he's been a guest at our house. And at Senator Rivera's.

Flo and I have known Rick for—" he turned to his daughter—"how long have we known him, Flo?"

She thought a minute, then said, "For five years, Dad."

"But not for six?" Johnny questioned. "What was he doing *six* years ago?"

They didn't answer that one. And Johnny said, "If you won't look for that old mare, Sheriff, I'll look for her myself. Just thought I'd let you know. So long."

He could feel cold stares aimed at him as he left the office. And he could hardly blame them. Sherwood stood high with them. He might some day be Adam Sawyer's son-in-law. Naturally the suggestion of a criminal past outraged them.

And chances were, Johnny admitted, that they were right. Certainly the color of a horse wasn't proof. But even a thin lead had to be chased down. He'd ride the Circle D range and look for an old mouse-colored mare.

Another idea hit Johnny. Suppose the mare had died a year ago. Even so, her last two or three colts should still be on the range. Her progeny of four years ago now bore the saddle of Val Cranston. What about a three-year-old? A two-year-old? A yearling? If a step-ladder of such increase were found in the Circle D herd, Rick Sherwood must explain where he'd acquired the producing mare.

It was suppertime and Johnny turned into a restaurant on Main. When he came out it was dark. Cranston's horse was no longer hitched in front of the hotel. And then Johnny remembered he hadn't told the Sawyers what had alerted him more than anything else—Cranston's startled reaction at sight of Johnny's boots.

As though that design meant something to the man. A ghost from his past?

It didn't seem possible. Cranston looked too soft and clerkish ever to have been a hard-riding raider. He might, though, have guilty knowledge of a raid in which he hadn't participated himself. But no use springing it on Sawyer. Sawyer would call it stupid, hair-brained, a distorted figment of Johnny's overwrought imagination.

Johnny entered the hotel and went up to his second-floor room. The room was dark. He fumbled for a match to light the kerosene lamp there.

The slight creak of a floor board made him take a quick side-step and whirl about. Something whizzed past his neck, skimming his shoulder blade. Johnny snatched at it, gripped it—a hand with a knife in it. An assailant grappled with him in the dark. A club-by fist smashed into his face.

Johnny's knee came up, catching the man's groin. His right hand held doggedly to the knife wrist, twisting. "Drop it," he said, and kicked again with his knee. He heard a bone in the wrist crack. A thud came as the knife hit the floor.

Guessing where the man's chin was, Johnny swung hard at it. His knuckles smacked into hair and he knew the man was bearded. The man jerked free and Johnny dived for a clinch.

He missed entirely, in the inky darkness, and his head hit a wall. The impact brought a splitting pain, leaving him groggy for a moment. He got up, groping for something to strike with. His hand touched the china wash pitcher.

Johnny gripped it and stood ready to crack down. The man could have a gun and might shoot at any sound. So Johnny made none. Neither did the other

man. Johnny imagined him on all fours groping for the knife.

His knees buckled and he went down. He didn't know what hit him. For half a minute he knew nothing at all.

He came dizzily to his senses and saw a faint light from the hallway. The door was open now. Which meant that the man had retreated. Johnny got to his feet and lighted the lamp. A knife with a six-inch skinning blade lay on the floor. He didn't touch it.

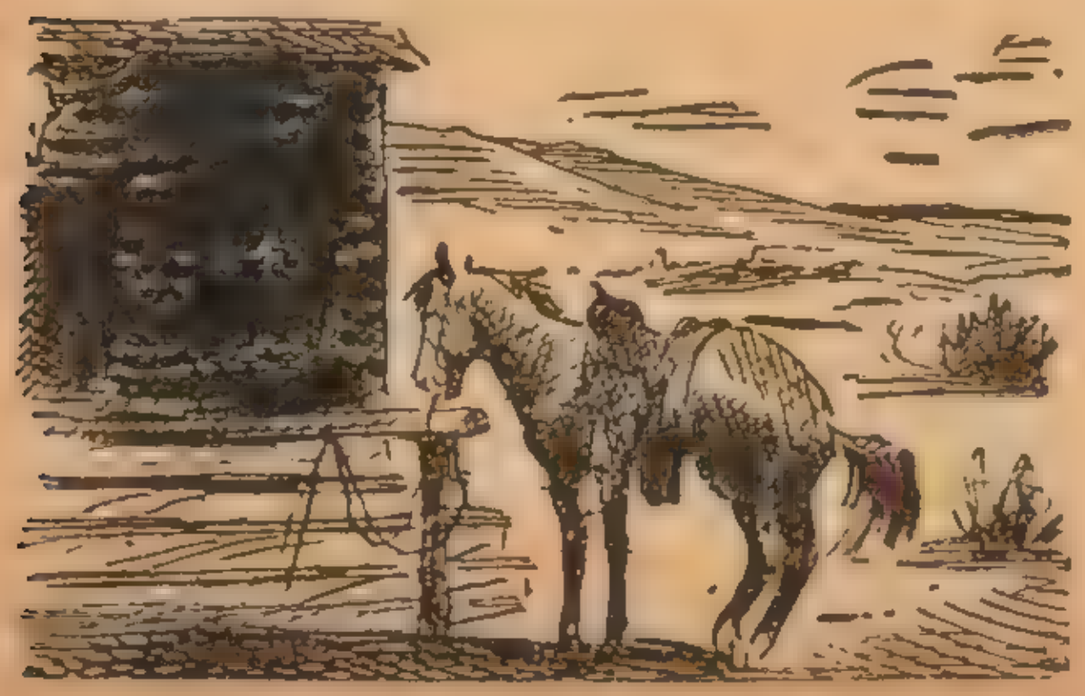
He stepped out into the hall and looked both ways. At the front end steps went down to the lobby. At the rear end other steps led to an alley.

He went down to see the desk clerk. The clerk had heard nothing, seen nothing. "Send word to the sheriff," Johnny said. "Tell him somebody tried to knife me in my room. The guy has a cracked wrist bone and a beard."

Johnny went back upstairs. He sat on the cot and looked around. An overturned bench-seat told what the man had struck him with.

The window shade was drawn. Johnny raised it and looked down on Commercial Street. It was peopled with the usual night traffic. Then Johnny saw Adam Sawyer. The sheriff was on the run, a tall black-coated figure heading straight for this hotel.

As fast as his long legs could carry



him, Adam Sawyer came dashing up to the room. His tone had a faint apology in it. "I seem to have underestimated you, Johnny Diamond."

"You mean about the mouse-colored horse?"

"Forget the horse. It means nothing. Sherwood and Cranston are above suspicion. But your boot clue was hot. It's already drawn blood."

"Not mine." Johnny grinned wryly. "The guy missed me."

"He hangs out at Chico," the sheriff said broodingly.

"Who?"

"The knifeman. You interviewed a bootblack there. A sly little man named Frankie Valdez."

"That's right. I asked him if he'd ever shined any boots like mine. Offered him ten pesos if he'd hand me a steer on 'em."

"Which was a mistake," Sawyer said dourly. "Petty blackmail would be right in Frankie's line. He remembered shining a pair of boots like yours. So he said to himself, 'If this gringo offers ten pesos, maybe the other man will give fifty to keep my mouth shut.' So as soon as you were out of sight he went to the other man to see what he could get."

"What makes you think so, Sheriff?"

"I don't have to think," Sawyer snapped. "I *know*. Word just came from Chico that Frankie Valdez lies dead in an alley there. Knifed."

He stooped to pick up a knife from the floor. "With this same blade, I'll wager. After sealing Frankie's lips, the man hurried straight here to seal yours."

Johnny couldn't doubt it. The sequence was pat and logical. But it went deeper than that, Johnny thought.

"By killing me," Johnny said, "the man could stop me from looking for the boots. That's not a good enough reason. It would be easier for him to toss the boots in the river."

Adam Sawyer ignored this. "The hotel clerk says you didn't see him. All you know is he has a broken wrist and a beard."

"Maybe the wrist is only sprained. I gave it a twist, that's all. I poked him in the chin and it felt hairy."

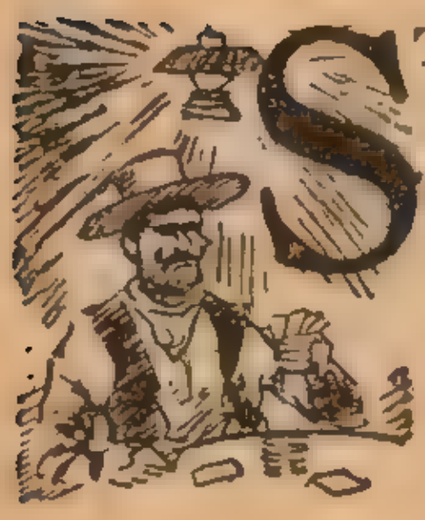
Sawyer heaved a sigh of exasperation. "I wish to Jupiter you'd stayed in Texas. First you ride into San Ysidro and there's a killing. You ride into Chico and there's another killing."

"Now that I'm in your lap, Sheriff, anything I can do to help?"

"I'm riding to Chico," Sawyer announced, "to turn that den of perdition inside out. You may come along if you like."

Chapter Five

Orme's Town



STARLIGHT made dim shadows along the river as they rode down its right bank. Something was puzzling Johnny. At dinner with the Riveras two evenings ago, Felicia had mentioned the name "Ernesto." To which her father had replied sharply, "Let us not speak of Ernesto."

"Who," Johnny queried now, "is Ernesto?"

"If I don't tell you," Sawyer whipped at him, "someone else will. Ernesto is the black sheep of the Riveras."

"Some no-good son or nephew?"

The sheriff shook his head morosely. "Eighteen years ago, in the 'sixties, vaqueros of the hacienda had their last fight with Indians. Most of the Indians were killed. The rest took flight, leaving a dead squaw and her papoose on the battlefield. The vaqueros took the baby home to the ranch. Don Ronaldo felt pity for it, adopted it, and named it Ernesto. Ernesto grew up as his foster son. But he was wild and undisciplined. He wouldn't go to school. He hung around dives at Las Perdidas and Chico. He broke Don Ronaldo's heart. A year ago Ernesto killed a man in a quarrel over a saloon woman. He escaped to the mesas and has been seen running with a gang of outlaws there. There's a murder warrant out for him."

They rode silently on. Ernesto, Johnny reasoned, couldn't be tonight's knifeman. A nineteen-year-old Indian doesn't have a beard. Nor would he have been old enough to take part in a raid six years ago. So Ernesto didn't concern him.

They came opposite Chico and forded the river. They rode into its false-fronted street and stopped at a place whose sign said: EL PESO DE ORO. Sounds of revelry came from inside.

"A man named Syd Orme runs this joint," Sawyer said. "They call him Shotgun Orme. I prosecuted him for a killing one time but he alibied himself out of it. Stay here and watch the horses while I go in."

Johnny didn't like it. The sheriff was treating him like a boy. But the man's stubborn look meant he couldn't be talked out of it.

Johnny watched him push in, alone, through the swinging, latticed doors. For a better look, Johnny rode Hackamore onto the walk. From this height he could see over the latticed doors and into the barroom.

Men were dancing with tawdry women. They paid no attention to the sheriff as he elbowed through them. Other men lined the bar, and beyond it loomed an enormously fat man in a double-breasted white jacket. His voice boomed out.

"Look who's here, gents. My old pal and college chump. The sheriff hisself. Have one on the house, Sheriff."

His eyes and his tone were derisive. The man's hog-jowled face glistened with sweat and Johnny could see bulging red muscles at his neck.

"Let's have no comedy," Sawyer said harshly. "A man has been killed within ten yards of your alley door, Orme."

Orme leaned his huge elbows on the bar. "So they tell me, Sheriff. Frankie Valdez, wasn't it? I always knew he'd come to a bad end."

"Where," Sawyer demanded, "is Constable Martinez?"

Orme shrugged. "Search me, Sheriff."

He looked, Johnny thought, like a huge bloated spider, hairy-handed, the sweat standing like drops of oil on his nearly bald head.

A glassy-eyed cowboy spoke from an end of the bar. "He's at Frankie's shack, if you want him."

Sawyer stepped to the latticed doors and talked over them to Johnny. "Valdez lived in a one-room shack down by the D and RG depot. See if you can find the town constable there. Get what information you can from him. Wait for me there."

Riding his own horse and leading the sheriff's, Johnny proceeded to the depot. An elderly Mexicana with a shawl over her head pointed out the Valdez jacal.

In it Johnny found Constable Pedro Martinez. He was a wiry little man, all nerves, with a sallow, harassed face. He was fussily sifting through the effects of the late Frankie Valdez.

Frankie himself lay on a cot, covered with a sheet. Johnny introduced himself and gave his message.

Martinez heaved a sigh of relief. "I am glad he is here, the good sheriff. Myself, I have no talent for these matters."

"It was you who found the body?"

"*Si*, señor. I am patrolling the alley at sundown and there he is. Near a trash can with a knife wound through his heart. The body is still warm. What does the good sheriff say for me to do?"

"We're to wait for him here. He's checking alibis at Orme's bar."

"Orme! *Que diablo!*" Fear mottled the constable's eyes and he lowered his voice. "He is *sin verguenza*, señor. But I am sure it is not Orme who kills him. I have already ask and he has not leave his bar between four 'clock and sundown."

"Did anybody leave about sundown for Perdidas, on a fast bronc?"

"I do not notice, señor."

"Did Frankie have a family?"

"Once he has a wife," Martinez said. "But she runs away with a wool buyer to Santa Fe. When the wool buyer deserts her, she goes to Las Vegas where now she lives in sin on the *Calle de la Amargura*."

"Did you ever see or hear about a pair of boots like mine?"

The constable, after a look at Johnny's Linked Diamonds boot, shook his head.

"The guy who knifed Frankie," Johnny said, "rode straight to Perdidas and tried the same play on me. Who's mean and tough enough around here

to do that?"

"There are many, señor. Evil men come here to drink and to play cards. Some of them will kill for a few pesos. Often they shoot up the plaza. I think I shall resign my job, señor."

Johnny gave him the makings of a cigarette and rolled one himself. An oil lamp lighted the room. It was smoking a little. He turned the wick down.

"Is there a medico in town?" Johnny asked.

"A doctor? He lives at the white cottage on the corner."

"I'll check with him. You keep an eye on the sheriff's horse."

Johnny led his own horse to the corner cottage. A man answered his knock. "You're the only doctor in town?"

When the man said yes, Johnny asked if a patient had stopped in this evening to have a sprained wrist treated. "A bearded man, I think."

"No one has been here, señor."

"Is there a drugstore in town?"

"Across from the post office."

Johnny rode there and found the place open. "Anybody stop in this evening," Johnny asked the druggist, "to buy liniment for a sprained wrist? Maybe a man with a beard."

"No one like that, mister. Mamie Griggs was here, though. She came in for a box of gauze bandages."

"Mamie Griggs? Who is she and where does she hang out?"

"She's a saloon girl. Hangs out at the Bonton Bar."

"Thanks." Johnny angled down the street to Orme's place. Looking in, he saw Adam Sawyer still busily probing for sundown alibis. He whistled, then beckoned as the sheriff looked his way.

Sawyer frowned at the interruption. He came out to the walk.

"Better look up a woman named Mamie Griggs," Johnny said. "She just bought gauze bandages."

"I told you," Sawyer said sternly, "to wait for me at Frankie's."

Johnny grinned. "I got restless. This Mamie's a fancy girl. She hangs out at the Bonton."

Sawyer strode half a block up the board walk. Johnny followed, leading his horse.

The Bonton was a cheap Mexican bar with rooms on the second floor. "Wait here," the sheriff said, and pushed the door open.

Johnny caught a quick glimpse of a bar with stools in front of it. Three men and two women were seated on the stools. Another couple was dancing. The door swung shut behind Sawyer and Johnny saw nothing more.

If the man they wanted was in there, he might escape by a rear exit. Johnny swung to his saddle and loped around the block, He turned into an alley and stopped directly back of the Bonton.

There was a lean-to shed elling from the Bonton. Over it Johnny saw a lighted window. He stood on his saddle and from there climbed to the shed roof. It brought his eyes level with the lighted window.

Peering in, he saw a man and a woman. They were seated on a bed. The woman was winding a bandage around the man's right wrist. The man had a dark, scarred face and a bearded chin.

He was facing the window and his eyes caught Johnny's face pressed against the pane there. His free hand pulled a gun from his belt. He triggered a bullet which smashed glass just as Johnny ducked below the sill. A cry of alarm came from the woman. Johnny jumped from the roof and

landed astride of the saddle.

As he whipped out his carbine, he heard the man dashing down steps to the barroom. Then Johnny heard two gunshots. Adam Sawyer, he supposed, was shooting it out with the man. A second later the man himself jumped out into the alley. Johnny covered him with the carbine. "Stop right there," he ordered.

The man had no gun in his hand. In the blackness of the alley he made only a dim silhouette. Only a wrapping of white at his wrist identified him. Suddenly he darted up the alley at a fast sprint. Johnny gave chase on his horse. At the alley's exit he caught up and crashed the stock down on the man's head.

Adam Sawyer came running and found them there. The bearded fugitive lay in a sprawl. Johnny had dismounted and was bending over him.

Sawyer rolled the man face up. He struck a match for a better look. "He's Diego Salvador. Thanks for knocking him over, young man."

"He potted at me through a window," Johnny said, "then beat it downstairs."

"As he came through the barroom," Sawyer added, "I traded shots with him. He missed me and my shot knocked the gun out of his hand. He's not much of a gunman. Usually fights with a knife."

Diego Salvador had a sprained wrist. Almost certainly he was the man who'd waylaid Johnny in a hotel room.

"I've no doubt he killed Frankie Valdez," Sawyer said. "But if I know this town," he predicted gloomily, "he'll have a dozen alibis. Every crook here always backs the others up."

The prediction was soon verified. Diego Salvador was handcuffed and jerked to his feet. Sawyer marched him first to confront customers at the Bonton, then to confront Orme at the Peso de Oro.

"He was at my bar from four o'clock till sundown," Orme swore. "Then he left here with Mamie Griggs."

"We went to the Bonton," Mamie said. "A drunk there wanted to dance with me and Diego hit him. It broke Diego's wrist and I went out to get a bandage."

The Bonton bartender verified this. So did a sly, rattish customer named Jakie Kim.

Adam Sawyer bit his lip and swore bitterly. They wasted an hour looking for the drunk. No one remembered who the drunk was. No one had seen Frankie Valdez since midafternoon. No one had heard anybody mention a pair of Linked Diamonds boots.

Sawyer looked up Constable Martinez. "I'll hold Salvador in the county jail a few days. But if we can't crack his alibi, in the end we'll have to turn him loose. Put him on a nag and bring him along."

It was long after midnight when Sawyer and Johnny rode back to Las Perdidas. Martinez followed them with the prisoner.

"One thing is certain," the sheriff muttered. "Diego Salvador did not take part in a Texas raid six years ago. At that time he was serving a term in the Colorado state prison. He was released only a year or so ago. Since then he's hung around Chico."

"Doing what?" Johnny asked.

"Whatever Syd Orme tells him to do. Orme controls most of the vice in Chico. My guess is Orme hired Diego to kill both you and Frankie Valdez."

"But not," Johnny insisted, "just to keep me from locating a pair of old

boots. He could ditch the boots, or burn 'em, or toss 'em in the river."

Sawyer had to agree with that. "The boots can have some indirect connection, just the same. Your asking about them scared somebody. He was afraid Frankie Valdez might talk. Not about the boots, but about something you'd bump into if you kept hunting for them. There's a hornets' nest somewhere, and I'll wager Orme's sitting on it. Right there in Chico. He was afraid you'd poke a finger into it, Johnny Diamond."

They rode into Perdidas and turned up Commercial. Johnny left Hackamore at the livery barn and walked to his hotel. In his room he bolted the door on the inside. Whoever had sent a man to kill him would, by all logic, send another on the same errand.

JOHNNY SLEPT TILL NOON. Later he checked at the sheriff's office and learned that nothing new had developed in the Frankie Valdez case.

Flo was there. Today she was a bit subdued. "Maybe we weren't quite fair to you," she conceded. "At least you stirred up something at Chico."

Johnny grinned at her. "Maybe if I'd keep stirrin' things up you'd begin to like me a little."

Her face clouded. "I wish you wouldn't. You'll just get yourself shot, or knifed in some dark alley. Father has sent a deputy over to Chico, and he'll handle everything there."

"I wasn't calculating," Johnny said, "on going to Chico. Not in the next day or two, anyway. Thought I'd take a pasear, tomorrow, out to the Circle D."

"What for?"

"Thought I'd ask Rick Sherwood where he got a mousey four-year-old with four white feet. The bronc he sold Cranston."

This drew a chilly response. "Suit yourself, Mr. Diamond. But if you think you'll find a stolen mare there, you're just plain stupid."

"No harm in asking, is there? Him bein' a fine, upstandin' citizen, like you say, he'd be glad to—"

"Tomorrow," Flo broke in, "you won't find him at home."

"Know where he'll be?"

"He won't be at the ranch. I know because we invited him to come to town and take dinner with us tomorrow evening. He sent word he can't come because he'll be busy shipping some cattle."

"Where does he ship from?"

"Thacker, I imagine. It's due north of his place and the nearest point on the railroad."

"Then if I bought a train ticket to Thacker, I could see him there." Johnny looked at her and smiled. "And I promise to be right polite."

He went out and a block down the street ran into Buck Perry. "Do you happen to know," he asked the Lazy M man, "just when and where the Circle D is shipping some cattle?"

"Couldn't say," Perry answered. "But you could find out, easy enough, from the district freight agent here. Just ask if the Circle D ordered some cars spotted at Thacker."

"What kind of an outfit are they, the Circle D?"

"A he-stuff outfit, mainly. They buy steer calves at weanin' and when they get to beef age they ship 'em to Kaycee."

"I mean Sherwood himself," Johnny prodded. "And his crew."

Perry looked thoughtful for a moment. "Rick Sherwood himself 's all

right. He stands well on this range. But his crew's a bit on the tough side. 'Specially the top rod out there, Alf Sansone. Just between you an' me, Sansone's a killer."

"Howcome," Johnny inquired, "a nice friendly fella like Sherwood 'd have an outfit like that?"

"That's easy." Perry nodded toward the chain of high, rugged mesas. "So the mesa rustlers'll leave him alone. The Circle D's shoot it out with 'em, every now and then."

Johnny nodded. He remembered meeting some Circle D riders chasing horse thieves south over Capulin Gap.

He went on to the Santa Fe depot and checked with the freight agent there. "Yes," the freight man said, "the Circle D asked us to spot six cattle cars tomorrow at Thacker. Steers for Kaycee. They're to be picked up at noon by an eastbound extra."

"Is there a passenger train up that way in the morning?"

"Yep. Leaves here at ten and stops at Thacker at eleven-eighteen."

"I'll be on it," Johnny said.

Chapter Six

Two Empties

JUST before ten in the morning he arrived at the depot and bought a round-trip ticket to Thacker. The train pulled in and he boarded the smoker. He settled back comfortably with a cigarette.

No use punishing Hackamore by a long saddle trip to the Circle D. This way the horse could rest in a stall while Johnny rode the cushions to meet Sherwood at his shipping-point up the line. And most likely the Sawyers were right. Sherwood would turn out to be on the level.

Just as the train was pulling out, another passenger sprinted across the platform and swung on. He boarded a coach back of the smoker. Val Cranston! But naturally Cranston would be making this same trip. No one could ship cattle by rail without first notifying the official brand inspector. The inspector must then be on hand at the shipping-point, to check the stock being loaded.

Johnny considered going back for a chat with Cranston, then decided he wouldn't. He could see Cranston at Thacker. Not that there was anything to see him about. This trip would just be routine official business for Cranston. The only man who could answer Johnny's question about the origin of a certain mouse-colored Morgan, would be Rick Sherwood.

The train followed the north bank of the Picketwire for a few miles, to a wide irrigated vega below Chico. Here the rails and the river split, the river winding easterly down a sunflower valley and the rails heading northeast across a greasewood prairie.

It was a local train, making stops at Earl and Tyronne. At 11:18 it stopped at Thacker and Johnny got off.

The only buildings there were a depot and a section house. Behind the latter, a Mexican woman was hanging out wash. A sleepy operator was tapping a telegraph key in the depot.

Far down a side track Johnny saw shipping-pens and six empty cattle cars. The pens were empty and no herders were in sight.

"What are *you* doing here?" The voice was Val Cranston's. It struck Johnny that there was an uneasy tone

in it. The man looked tense and strangely apprehensive.

"Heard Rick Sherwood's shipping today," Johnny said. "Thought I'd come up and see him."

Cranston started to say something, then clamped his lips and turned to look southward across the bare range. The Circle D lay in that direction, somewhere in the lower Picketwire valley.

On the south horizon Johnny could see a cloud of dust. That, no doubt, would be six carloads of Circle D steers being driven this way. It would take about two hundred steers to fill six cars.

"We can wait for 'em at the pens," Johnny said, and headed down the siding toward the spotted cars.

Cranston did not at once follow. He went into the depot, perhaps to ask the operator about the soon due freight train. Freights often ran several hours late.

Johnny walked a quarter mile down the siding to the pens. He climbed up on the pen fence and sat there, gazing south. The dust cloud was still many miles away.

Then he saw a nearer dust cloud approaching swiftly, a single rider. In a little while the man drew up at the shipping-pens. He was astride a rangy strawberry roan branded Circle D.

"Whatcha doin' here?" the man demanded. The tone was alert and hostile. He was a small man with a head the shape of a bullet, and he wore crossed gun belts.

"Sittin' on a fence," Johnny told him, "waitin' to see Sherwood."

The man twisted in his saddle to look south. The dust of the drive was still beyond the rise of prairie. Twisting back toward Johnny the man asked, "Did you come with Cranston?"

"We rode out on a train together," Johnny said. "There he is now." He nodded toward the depot.

The Circle D man spurred his strawberry roan to meet Cranston, who was now walking toward them down the siding.

Johnny saw the two meet about halfway between the pens and the depot. A colloquy between the two took less than a minute. Then the two-gunned cowboy went racing back south.

Cranston came on to the pens and took a perch on the fence beside Johnny. Moist beads stood on his face.

"We got a long time to wait," he said. "Operator tells me that freight's two-three hours late. Won't be here till midafternoon."

"When can we get a passenger back to Las Perdidas?"

"Five o'clock." Cranston produced two cigars and offered one to Johnny.

"Thanks. I'd rather roll my own," Johnny said, and did so. "Who was that fella with all the artillery?"

"He's Ferd Smith of the Circle D. Sherwood sent him ahead to make sure the cars are spotted. I told him they could take their time, because the freight's gonna be late."

The name Ferd Smith rang a bell. Johnny vaguely recalled hearing it at

San Ysidro. It had drifted to him while Sheriff Sawyer was checking alibis after the killing of José Pacheco. "I was shooting pool with Ferd Smith." There'd been two Circle D mounts, Johnny remembered, tied that day in front of the San Ysidro pool room.

Ferd Smith was now out of sight, and had no doubt rejoined the drive beyond the lift of prairie.

Time dragged, and it seemed to Johnny that the drive was mighty slow coming on. It seemed to make lots of dust but very little progress. The sun passed its zenith. And there was no place a man could buy a lunch here.

It was after one o'clock before Johnny could make out details of the oncoming herd. Four men were driving it. They were approaching at a brisk pace now, the steers lowing, riders whirling ropes at their flanks.

Cranston got down and opened a pen gate. The cattle came on and were driven into the pens. Whiteface stuff, Johnny noted, all mature steers branded Circle D.

One of the riders was Rick Sherwood. After exchanging greetings with Cranston, he rode up to where Johnny was seated on a fence. "Hi fella. Met you at the Riveras, didn't I?"

He hooked a leg over his saddle horn and licked a cigarette. Range dust covered him from head to foot.

He looked, Johnny thought, like a hard working stockman. His slate gray eyes met Johnny's with a steady gaze. His one gun had an ivory handle. He looked solid and virile, Johnny thought, and only the self-willed set of his lips and a deeply cleft chin kept him from being handsome.

"Just thought maybe you could help me," Johnny said. "I been tryin' to trace an old Texas mare. She was a mousey Morgan with four white stockings and a starred forehead. She'd be about fourteen years old now."

Sherwood's stare was expressionless. "Yeh?"

"Thought maybe some trader sawed her off on you, five or six years ago. That could happen, easy enough, without your knowin' anything about where the mare came from."

Sherwood shook his head slowly. "Can't remember any mare like that. What made you think I had one?"

"I didn't think you had one," Johnny said. "But leads are scarce and I'm playin' 'em all. That mare had a colt every year and they were always marked just like she was. It's reasonable to figure she kept on havin' colts after my folks lost her. Cranston rides a four-year-old with her breed and markings. Says he bought it from you."

Sherwood's lean, handsome face took the look, Johnny thought, of a poker player suddenly confronted with a stiff, unexpected bet. "Sure," he said. "I remember that bronc I sold Val. And the mare that foaled him. She was a white-stockinged buckskin. Isn't that right, Alf?"

One of the other Circle D men had ridden up. Johnny had seen him before. He had shaggy hair and a cold, slablike face.

"That's right," Alf Sansone agreed. "A white-stockinged buckskin."

Johnny noticed, then, that each of the four Circle D mounts was lathered and blown. Not just tired and droopy, but lathered and blown.

Rick Sherwood was smiling now. His response had completely stymied further inquiry. It was entirely possible for a buckskin mare to have a mousey colt. The sire of the colt would be unknown, and could be any stallion on

the range.

The loading of cattle was in brisk progress. Thirty steers were hazed up the inclined chute into the first car, filling it to capacity. Then Alf Sansone and Ferd Smith climbed to car roofs, to release the wheel brake of each car. The track had a one-percent downgrade toward Kansas, and when other men of the crew used pinch bars at the axles the string of cars rolled slowly along the siding.

Another thirty steers went into the second car. The process was repeated twice more, until four cars were loaded.

Johnny felt a new stir of interest. For the fourth car absorbed the last steer. There were no cattle left for the last two cars. Why had Sherwood ordered six cars when he was only bringing enough cattle to fill four?

During the loading Val Cranston had stood faithfully by the chute, checking the brand of each steer as it went into a car. Now he looked southwest down the main line and saw smoke.

"There she comes, Rick," he shouted. "You just got 'em loaded in time."

Sherwood turned to one of his men. "You ride the caboose to Kaycee, Sam. And see that you come back sober."

To Johnny he remarked carelessly, "Sorry I can't help you locate that old mare, fella. Chances are she's buzzard bait by now. Any time you come by the Circle D, stop in. So long, Val."

With Sansone and Smith he rode off south toward the Picketwire. One of them led the saddled horse of the man Sam, who, having been detailed to chaperon the shipment to market, remained at the pens.

The freight rumbled in. Its engine was uncoupled and backed in upon the siding, there to pick up four cars of cattle and make them part of the train.

Johnny walked thoughtfully toward the depot. During the inquiry at San Ysidro, Buck Perry had asked if Pacheco had a family. Only a married daughter, they said, who lived at Thacker and whom Pacheco had visited the Sunday before his death.

The only woman here, as far as Johnny could see, was the section foreman's wife. She was still busy with her wash back of the section house. Johnny continued on past the depot and approached her.

"*Buenos dias, señora.*" He took off his hat and smiled. "I'm Johnny Diamond, a friend of Don Ronaldo Rivera."

She looked up at him with sad eyes. "Don Ronaldo is a good man, señor. Always he is kind to us *pobres*. He has paid for my poor father's funeral from which I have just returned."

Johnny gave a sympathetic nod. "Your father paid you a visit, didn't he? Sunday before last?"

She thought back. "Yes, señor, it was *el domingo pasado* that he was last here."

"A few cars of cattle were shipped out that day," Johnny suggested. "Just like today. Were they Circle D cattle?"

"I cannot say, señor. From here we cannot see the brands."

"But Circle D men were loading them?"

"*Si, señor.* My father walked up to the pens to see if they needed help. But they did not."

"Thanks, señora." A surge of excitement gripped Johnny as he left her and went to the depot.

"How many cars of cattle," he asked the operator, "were shipped from here Sunday before last?"

The man looked up the record of it.

"Seven. Circle D stuff."

A hunch hit Johnny. If true, it offered a motive for José Pacheco's murder. Also it would explain something else. Why Rick Sherwood, after ordering six cattle cars today, had filled only four of them!

It would even explain the blown and lathered horses. Mounts which had kept the easy pace of a cattle drive from the Picketwire shouldn't be winded. But if they'd stopped just before arriving, riding frantically and furiously among the cattle to cut out and turn back a third of them, the horses would be blown and lathered.

The four cars now having been shunted into the train, the freight pulled out for Kansas City. As the caboose went by, Johnny turned to look at the two empties still spotted at the pens.

The plan, Johnny could hardly doubt, had been to fill those cars with brands other than Circle D.

Chapter Seven

Bullet in the Dark

WHEN the westbound local came along Johnny boarded it with Val Cranston. He sat beside the brand inspector all the way to Las Perdidas, talking about anything except cattle. It wouldn't do to voice his suspicions. Because if they were correct, Cranston was bound to be in it with Sherwood.

"You been around this range long?" Johnny asked casually.

"Only about three years," Cranston said. "Before that I was a weigh master at the Denver stockyards."

Johnny had no doubt it was true: Cranston would hardly lie about anything so easily checked on. He didn't look like a ranch type. A Denver clerk's job fit him much better. From there he could have advanced to a political appointment as brand inspector of this district.

Certainly the man couldn't have been one of three outlaws who'd gone raiding in Texas six years ago. But just as certainly he could more recently have been corrupted into falsifying brands at an isolated shipping point like Thacker.

The train was pulling into Las Perdidas when Cranston asked, "Rick explained about that mouse-colored horse of mine, I suppose?"

"Yeh," Johnny told him. "Out of a buckskin mare, he said."

He got off at the depot and walked up Commercial to his hotel. After supper he went out looking for Buck Perry. Johnny wanted to confide in someone. Buck Perry would listen, if he could be found. But Sheriff Sawyer wouldn't. Sawyer would give him a quick brush-off. He'd be completely incredulous about any scheme of rustling in carload lots, hatched by Sherwood with the connivance of Cranston.

Johnny looked in at various saloons and failed to see Perry. He tried a hotel or two. It was dark by the time he headed back toward his own.

Then he became aware he was being followed. A smallish man wearing a sheepskin coat almost bumped into him twice. The collar of the coat was turned up over the ears, so that only a sly, narrow face peeped out. A face Johnny remembered seeing at Orme's bar in Chico.

Johnny circled down to Elm Street and stood watching a sidewalk dice

game there. Glancing over his shoulder he saw the man again. Johnny strolled to the corner and the man furtively followed. Was he being watched to see if he made a report to the law?

Johnny had considered doing just that. But the law was Adam Sawyer and Sawyer wouldn't believe him. He was Sherwood's friend and might some day be Sherwood's father-in-law. But it would be easy to make a test. And throw a scare into the man following him.

So Johnny turned into a cigar store and inquired where Adam Sawyer lived. At number 400 Piñon Lane, they told him, on the south side.

Johnny took that direction. Once he'd left the business district the streets were inky-dark. Faint footsteps half a block behind told that he was still being followed.

Piñon Lane was steep. The Sawyer residence, they'd told him, was a stone bungalow on a corner.

He came to a corner bungalow of stone. A porch light was on there. The windows showed lamp glow, with the shades drawn. The sheriff and his daughter should have finished supper by now. Johnny remembered they'd invited Rick Sherwood to be their supper guest, and that he'd sent word he couldn't come.

Johnny couldn't barge in with an unprovable theory about Sherwood and Cranston. They'd deride it and show him the door. Nevertheless he wanted to knock on that door and be admitted for a few minutes. Eyes were watching from the dark, the eyes of a spy probably sent by Cranston. Johnny wanted to impress and frighten Cranston, and in turn Sherwood. They'd assume he'd come here to accuse them and it might throw them off balance, jockeying them into some false move.

Why not simply go in and ask Sawyer for the latest about Diego Salvador? Salvador was being held in jail under suspicion of knifing Frankie Valdez. "Has he admitted anything yet?" Johnny could ask. Whatever the answer, Johnny would promptly take his leave.

But the spy outside would misinterpret the call, assuming that it concerned a suspicious circumstance at Thacker.

A smile quirked Johnny's lips as he mounted the Sawyer steps. The shot came just as he reached the porch level. It barked from the gloom of a cottonwood across the street, its bullet smashing into a porch post only inches from Johnny's head.

He dived to a crouched position back of the porch rail, expecting a second shot. He heard running feet, then silence. Not being armed himself, Johnny didn't consider giving chase.

Anger boiled through him. Blast this town ordinance which made a man go defenseless here! It was humiliating to dodge and crouch back of a porch rail, while killers hunted him from the dark.

The house door opened and light from inside exposed Johnny kneeling there. In the open doorway stood Adam Sawyer. His questions cracked:

"Did I hear a shot? What are you doing there, young man?"

"I was playin' tag with a slug," Johnny said.

Flo Sawyer appeared by her father. Johnny got to his feet and said bitterly, "I was playin' blind-man's-buff with a bullet. Here's where it hit." He thumbed toward a splintered hole in a porch post.

Sawyer stepped back into the parlor. He picked up a lamp and came out on the porch with it. Gravely he inspected the bullet hole.

"So Orme tried it again!" he muttered. "That makes twice he tried to get you, Johnny Diamond."

"Orme," Johnny snapped back, "had nothing to do with it this time. He wouldn't know I was at Thacker today. Only Cranston and the Circle D's knew that." He added with a shrug, "But *you* wouldn't believe it! So what's the use?"

"I wouldn't believe what?" Sawyer demanded.

"That I know why José Pacheco was killed at San Ysidro. I didn't come here to tell you about it. But they thought I did. So they tried to mow me down."

Flo looked at him. "*They?*" she queried. "Who do you mean?"

"Your boy friend," Johnny charged fiercely. "Sherwood and his stooge, Cranston. They've been stealing this range blind. Pacheco got wind of it, so they had him gunned. Today I got another whiff, so they sicked a bullet on me too."

They stared at him. "That," Adam Sawyer said, "is the most absurd thing I ever heard."

Johnny turned brusquely. "Sorry I bothered you. Good night."

But the sheriff caught his arm and whirled him toward the open door. "I don't believe you, young man, but I'll listen to your story. You're confusing Orme with Sherwood, that's all. Somebody *did* try to kill you on my doorstep, and I insist on getting to the bottom of it."

"All you insist on," Johnny retorted, "is whitewashin' the guy you aimed to have here for dinner tonight. He couldn't come because he was rustlin' a coupla carloads of somebody's cattle."

"Nonsense!" Sawyer derided. "But come inside. I must hear how you arrived at this fantastic theory." Still gripping an arm, he propelled Johnny into his parlor and made him sit down. Flo closed the door and stood with her back against it, staring at Johnny.

"Now just what's this brainstorm of yours," the sheriff demanded, "about the Circle D stealing cattle? Why, the Circle D carries on a relentless war against stock thieves! Outlaws who hang out in the mesas and drive Colorado stock down into New Mexico. Time and again the Circle D has chased such outlaws and brought the stock back."

That brought a grim grin to Johnny's lips. "Yeh, I saw 'em do that once up through Capulin Gap. They brought the stock back but they didn't catch any outlaws. Might be they framed that chase just for the looks of it. Why? To fool you and their honest neighbors. Make you think the rustlin' is all southbound on the hoof, whereas really it goes eastbound on rails. It gives you a mesa outlaw complex, so you don't look for stolen cattle where they really are."

"And you," Sawyer challenged, "know where they *really* are."

"Sure. They're packing-house beef by now. Shipped to Kaycee or Chicago and sold in the stockyards there."

Adam gave a sigh. "Very well. Let's hear all of it, young man."

"I don't claim to know the details," Johnny admitted, "or how long it's been goin' on. Probably for three years."

The sheriff's head jerked back a little. He turned and met Flo's eyes. A half-startled look was in them. Then

with a shrug Sawyer turned to face Johnny again. "You say three years, I suppose, because perhaps Buck Perry told you we've had more rustling complaints in the last three years than ever before."

"No," Johnny corrected, "I guessed three years because that's how long Cranston's been brand inspector around here. He's in on the rustlin' himself."

"How can you dare say that about Val?" This protest came from Flo. "He's practically engaged to my cousin, Felicia Rivera."

"And Senator Rivera himself," Sawyer added, "got Cranston his appointment."

"At whose request?" Johnny questioned. "Sherwood's? It's a laugh, when you stop to think about it. Sherwood wants to steal the senator's cattle. So he asks the senator to appoint Cranston brand inspector. 'Anything to oblige a friend,' says the senator. After which Val and Ricky steal the senator blind."

"You have evidence, of course?" Sawyer challenged.

"Nope," Johnny said. "Just a theory with a few pegs that fit. One peg that fits is José Pacheco. His daughter lives in the section house at Thacker. Sunday before last Pacheco spent the week-end with her. Half a mile down the siding he saw the Circle D loadin' seven cars of cattle. So he walked down there and offered to help 'em. They said no thanks and he went back to the section house. That much we can prove."

"Everything else is a guess?"

"Not quite. But this much is. Pacheco noticed that some of those cattle had a Circle D brand, and some had a Bar L. He supposed it was a joint shipment. Then Pacheco went home to San Ysidro and started thinking. If it was a joint shipment, why hadn't Rivera sent a couple of his own vaqueros to help with the loading? It worried Pacheco. He decided to send a message to the senator and get a check on it. So Pacheco began asking his customers if they'd take a message to Rivera. The Circle D got itchy and stopped him with a slug."

"Absurd on the face of it," Sawyer scoffed. "If cattle had been stolen from the senator a week ago Sunday, he would have reported it to the sheriff's office."

"How could he?" Johnny countered. "Rivera won't miss the cattle till roundup time."

Sawyer asked coldly, "Is that all?"

"Nope. Today they tried the same steal again. Only I happened to show up at Thacker. Six cars were spotted and steers to fill 'em were on the way. But a Circle D gunnie named Ferd Smith rode ahead and spotted me. Cranston sent Smith back to the drive to warn 'em I was there. All they could do was cut out everything but Circle D stuff. They had to work fast, and it sure lathered their broncs. It left 'em just enough to fill four cars. Cranston was scared stiff when he saw me get off the train."

"I don't believe it," Sawyer repeated.

"Neither do I," Flo echoed. "No one in his right mind could think that about Rick and Val."

"In that case," Johnny grinned, "I'm loco. Which still leaves a slug in your porch post."

"Fired," Sawyer insisted, "by an agent of Syd Orme. Did you see the man?"

"Only in the dark," Johnny said. "And not well enough to identify him

in court. Little guy in a sheepherder's coat. Collar turned up about his ears. Big floppy hat. I admit he looked a little like one of those toughs I saw in Orme's bar."

"You can't tie up decent citizens," Sawyer maintained, "with the riffraff of Chico. Cranston has no connection with Orme. The same goes for Sherwood. Both attempts on your life stemmed from your inquiry about Linked Diamonds boots at Chico."

Johnny shrugged. "Have it your own way, Sheriff. I'll be shovin' along now." He went to the door. "So long, folks."

Flo followed him to the porch steps. "Where," she asked with a shade of anxiety, "are you going now?"

"To bed," Johnny said, "if I don't get bushwhacked on the way to the hotel."

"I mean tomorrow."

A glint came to Johnny's eyes. "Tomorrow I'll buckle on a gun. They won't let me wear it in town, so I'll hit for the range."

"But where?"

He smiled grimly. "If I told you, you might pass it on to your friend Sherwood next time he comes acourtin'. Then he could have someone slip up on me, some night when I'm asleep, and cut my throat."

Blood raced in an angry flood to her cheeks. "You're beastly!" she said. "I hope I never see you again."

Johnny left her and turned down the dark street, cautious and alert. A bullet was lurking for him. Either this night or some other. A bullet or a knife. A bullet from Sherwood or a knife from Orme.

Neither came on his way to the hotel. He locked himself in his room, mulling over today and yesterday. Sherwood's pattern of crookery seemed clear enough. Mix stock of a neighbor with your own and ship to market by rail. A thing which could only be done with the help of the brand inspector.

But now Sherwood was warned. He'd be careful not to make any more crooked shipments for a while. Which meant he'd boil over with resentment against a kid from Texas. Thacker, he'd assume, would be watched after this. He wouldn't dare repeat the operation.

What about Orme? Was he in any way connected with Sherwood? The patterns of motive at Chico were hazy and didn't seem to make sense. You inquire of a bootblack there about a pair of boots, and right away the bootblack gets killed. And right away you yourself get waylaid in your room. Nothing about that seemed remotely connected with stealing cattle. If a man at Chico had a pair of boots like that, he could claim he'd found them; or that he'd won them in a dice game. No sound reason for him to cover up by knifing Frankie Valdez.

When Johnny at last slipped into sleep, he had no plan at all.

Chapter Eight

Allies for Johnny

IN THE morning Johnny checked out of the hotel. At the livery barn he saddled Hackamore, then packed the bay pack mare and rode down East Main, leading her. A forty-five was belted around his waist now.

Riding out of town, he decided to check with Chuck Wiggins at the Rivera ranch and Buck Perry on the San Ysidro. Maybe they could pass him a tip or some worthwhile advice.

The trail led over the Frijoli hills,

jutting out from Fisher's Mesa and thickly studded with piñons. It was the road to San Ysidro. Also it was the road to both the Rivera ranch and the Circle D. To the right a steep slope ascended to Fisher's Mesa. Other mesas chained easterly from it: Horseshoe; Johnson's; Trinchera. To the left lay the broad level valley of the Picket-wire.

Here, for a short way, was a ridge of piñons. Before Johnny was halfway across it he heard, back of him, the hoofbeats of a loping horse. He stopped, looked over his shoulder, then reined sharply around. A wryness curved his lips as the pursuer caught up with him.

He tipped his hat and smiled. "Mornin', Flo. You're out kinda early for a town girl."

She didn't smile back. Her mount was blowing hard as she stopped it beside Johnny's. "I wanted to see you," she said.

"How did you know I was headin' this way?"

"Trouble's this way," she said bitterly. "And you're sure to head for trouble."

"You mean the Circle D's this way. But I wasn't aimin' to go there, just now. First I figured to have a little confab with Chuck Wiggins and Buck Perry."

"That's just what I was afraid of. You'll spread it all over the range that Rick Sherwood's been stealing cattle. Rick's sure to hear about it. And you know what that means, I suppose."

"You tell *me*."

"He'll do exactly what you'd do yourself. What any proud, red-blooded man would do. Rustler's a fighting word."

"He'll gun me, you mean?"

"He'll shoot you to ribbons," Flo predicted. "Or maybe you'll shoot him to ribbons. And all because you let your imagination run away with your tongue. Please don't be stupid." Her voice took a pleading tone. "Rick Sherwood never stole anything in his life. I guarantee it. Please stay away from him for just one week. I'll convince you, by that time, that you're wrong."

"How?" Johnny challenged.

"I can write to the Kansas City stockyards. I can ask what brands were in the seven cars shipped from Thacker a week ago Sunday. They'll tell me there was only one brand, Circle D."

Johnny shook his head. "Someday there'll be a law makin' 'em check brands at the receiving end. But there's no check like that now. Brands are inspected only at the shipping end. At the market end those seven cars were unloaded, weighed, and sold by the pound to the highest bidder. A day later they were beef."

"Then," Flo proposed desperately, "we'll watch the next shipment at Thacker."

"Too late. The Circle D knows I'm hep to 'em. If they try that shipping trick again, it won't be at Thacker."

They heard loping hoofbeats approaching from the direction of Las Perdidas. "It might be someone after you," Flo suggested apprehensively. "Let's get off the road and let him pass."

Johnny didn't think so, but the girl insisted and they rode into the piñons a little way. In a few minutes a rider raced by, spurring a black pony. Johnny had a good look at his profile. The man had a slight build and a sly, sharp-angled face.

"That's the guy, on a bet," Johnny

said. "I mean the guy who trailed me to your front steps last night. The one who flipped a slug. I'd bet a saddle on it."

"He's Jakie Kim," Flo said with certainty.

"You've seen him before?"

She nodded. "Dad's had him in jail several times. Once he was held under suspicion for a pool-hall shooting at Chico."

"I got him placed now," Johnny said. "He was one of Diego Salvador's alibis at the Bonton bar, the other day."

The man had disappeared down the road now. "He's got a long ride ahead of him," Johnny brooded. "So chances are he'll stay all night and won't start back till tomorrow."

"Back from where?"

"From the Circle D. That's where he's headed, all right."

Flo flushed. "What," she asked coolly, "makes you think he's riding to the Circle D?"

"Common sense. Val Cranston sicked him on me last night, and he missed. So when he reports back to Val, Val gets worried. Bright and early this morning he sends Jakie Kim with a message to somebody. The way I figure it, the message oughta be somethin' like this: '*Cuidado*. Johnny from Texas went to see the sheriff last night. We tried to stop him but missed. What do we do now?'"

"That vivid imagination of yours!" Flo murmured scornfully.

"Let's bet on it," Johnny proposed with a grin. "If he goes straight to the Circle D, you owe me a date first night I'm in town. If he doesn't, I'll head straight back to Texas."

She gave him a straight look. "I'd take you up on that, Johnny Diamond, if there was any way to prove it."

"Provin' it's a cinch," Johnny said. "Let's ride on to the Riveras. Pick out any *mozo* you want. Send him with a message to Sherwood. The *mozo*'ll get there so late he'll have to stay all night at the bunkshack. If Kim's there, he'll see the guy. If he isn't, I lose my bet."

"Why should I spy," Flo protested indignantly, "on a trusted friend?"

"You were goin' to send a letter to the Kaycee stockyards. That's spyin' on him. I'm offerin' you a nice polite way to spy. Just send a *mozo* over there on any errand you want. He'll either see Jakie there or he won't. Of course, if you're afraid—"

"Just to show you up, I'll do it!"

Thereafter they rode silently together, easterly toward the Rivera ranch. Johnny looked at Flo and felt a desperate eagerness to convince her. Convincing her meant at least that she'd never marry Sherwood.

"I won't say a word about this," he promised, "to anyone but Chuck Wiggins and Buck Perry. And I'll tell them to keep it under their hats."

"You couldn't tell Uncle Ronald," she said, "even if you wanted to. The legislature's in session again and he went back to Denver."

"I'll just stop at the bunkhouse long enough to see Chuck. Then I'll go on to Perry's."

"You'll keep away from the Circle D?" Her face was anxious again.

"Like they were poison," he promised.

They topped another piñon rise and dropped into the valley of Grosella Creek. The Rivera meadows made a purple ribbon there. After crossing a wooden bridge they turned through a gate into the ranch street. Johnny stopped at the bunkhouse.

"Say howdy to Felicia for me," he said. "And don't forget our date, next time I'm in town."

Flo rode severely on without answering. Johnny went into the bunkshack and found Chuck Wiggins there. The redhead was stuffing his belongings into a duffel bag.

"Goin' somewhere?" Johnny inquired. "What's the matter? Felicia turn you down?"

"I was only hired," Wiggins explained gloomily, "to bust a string of broncs. Made the job last as long as I could. It's done now. Those broncs are so tame now even the cook can ride 'em."

"Where you headin'?"

"For the first payroll I can get on. Know anybody needs a good puncher?"

"Why don't you try Buck Perry's outfit, over on the San Ysidro?"

"As good a place as any," Wiggins said.

"Let's get started, then. I'm headed that way myself."

They went first to the cookshack for a lunch of pork and frijolis. "And cheer up," Johnny said. "I got some good news for you."

"About what?" Chuck asked.

"About your number-one rival, Val Cranston. Unless I'm loco, he's been helpin' the Circle D steal steers."

"Who are you kidding?" Wiggins demanded.

"Nobody. Open your ears and listen." Johnny proceeded to outline his theory about Sherwood and Cranston. He linked it to the murder of Pacheco at San Ysidro, and to an attempt on his own life last night in Las Perdidas.

Wiggins weighed each point shrewdly and in the end added a few of his own. "It's a fact that every outfit on this range has been tallyin' out short at all roundups for the last three years. We laid it to mesa outlaws. Nobody ever thought of the Circle D's. But they're hard cases, all right. Kansas gunnies, most of 'em, who used to know Alf Sansone when he was marshal at Abilene."

"We'll hash it over," Johnny suggested, "with Buck Perry. If we can pin this deadwood on Cranston, it leaves you top man with Felicia."

"That Cranston guy," Wiggins scowled, "has sure been beatin' my time. Buildin' a fire under him 'd suit me just fine."

After lunch Chuck tied a roll back of his saddle. They set out down the San Ysidro road.

"Where," he asked, "does the Circle D run its range horses?"

"Wintertime," Chuck said, "they run out here in the open flats. But summers you find 'em up in the open timber. And on those grassy benches sticking out from the mesas." He pointed to a curve in the rimrock of Horseshoe Mesa. "They's a big spring up there. Old trapper's cabin right by it. Plenty of range horses water there, this season."

Johnny had been looking over his shoulder. A buggy, driven by an elderly Mexican, was gaining on them.

"That one of the Rivera *mozos?*"

Wiggins looked back. "Yeh, it's old Miguel. He's number one *mozo* at the house."

"He'd do you a favor, wouldn't he?"

"Sure. Miguel and I been palsy-walsy, last few weeks."

"Listen, Chuck. When he catches up we'll hold a little confab with him. And here's what you tell him." Johnny gave rapid instructions and Wiggins was fully coached when the buggy drew up by them.

"*Buenos dias, señores,*" said Miguel.

"Drivin' to the Circle D?" Chuck inquired.

"*Si, señor.* Last week they send us over a dressed antelope. So now I take ten gallons of chokecherry wine. With the compliments of the *casa* Rivera."

Johnny smiled. It meant that Flo, having enlisted the help of her cousin Felicia, was making good on her bargain. A gift for a gift was the rule at every Spanish hacienda.

"You'll spend the night there?" suggested Wiggins.

"But of course, señor. Early *mañana* I shall return."

Johnny broke in to inquire: "Miguel, how can I get up to the big spring under the rimrock of Horseshoe Mesa?"

"You ride up McBride Creek, señor, and take the right fork. Much brush is there and it is very steep—" Miguel went on to explain in detail the route to the high mountain spring.

"Thanks," Johnny said. "I aim to camp up there for a week or two. Want to look over the range mares that water there. I'm huntin' for an old mousey mare with four white stockings."

Miguel looked puzzled.

"I have never seen such a brand, señor."

It was Chuck's turn now. "Listen, Miguel. This is important. At supper tonight in the Circle D bunkshack, you put out a little idle gossip. Say you met a Texas cowboy on the road this afternoon. Which is true. You recognized him as a recent guest of Senator Rivera. So you stopped to pass the time of day. Which is true *tambien.* Only you don't mention I was with him."

The *mozo* stared. "But why should I say this, señor?"

"Never mind why. Just say it. You remark that this Texas cowboy asked how to get up to Wild Turkey Waterhole. He'll camp there, he told you, for a week to see if a mousey mare waters there. For a whole week he'll be there alone, camping in the old cabin. Is that clear, Miguel?"

Miguel was confused, but he said, "Since I must speak only the truth, I will do it, señor." He drove on.

Wiggins, with Johnny leading the pack mare, followed at a slower pace. "I don't like it," the redhead muttered. "You're usin' your own skin to bait a trap with."

Johnny grinned. "And why not? When Sherwood sends someone up there to gun me, I'll be watchin' for him. It'll show his hand, Chuck."

They saw the buggy ahead veer to the left on a trail pointing toward the Circle D. Johnny and Chuck kept to the main road.

At San Ysidro plaza they turned downcreek a few miles to Buck Perry's place, the Lazy M. Perry, a bachelor, lived with his hands at a long, gabled bunkhouse.

There were four of these hands and Perry was eating supper with them when Wiggins came in with Johnny Diamond.

"Howdy," Perry greeted. "Set and help yourself to victuals. What's new in town, Johnny?"

He presented his crew: Slim McBride, Dyke Dixon, Ed Sopers, and Juan Romero. Romero, apparently, doubled as cook. He was brown and chunky. The others were lean, sun-

blackened men with range-wise eyes. Johnny liked the cut of them.

"Don't start callin' me loco," he began with a sober grin, "till I finish." Once more he gave out his hunches about Sherwood and Cranston.

There was á long brittle silence. Then Slim McBride gave a low whistle. Perry blinked and said, "Thacker, huh? They ordered six cars. But when they heard you was there, they only shipped four!"

Ed Sopers's eyes narrowed to shrewd slits. "They could work it, all right, if they had a crooked brand inspector to back 'em up."

"You say Cranston was jumpy?" Slim McBride put in.

"As nervous as a cat," Johnny said.

"He's had that job three years," Perry brooded. "Durin' which we been short about ten percent, every round-up."

Dyke Dixon sat on a bunk and began oiling his gun.

Buck Perry, however, promptly vetoed Johnny's scheme for making human bait of himself at a rimrock waterhole.

"If your guess is wrong," he summed up, "nothing'll happen. If it's right, bullets'll happen. And not just from one gun. They'd burn you down, Johnny."

"I'll take a chance," Johnny said.

"No you won't," the veteran stockman decreed. "We'll all go. Juan can bring all the horses back except yours, Johnny. The rest of us'll hide in that cabin. Then if the Circle D comes ashootin', let 'em come."

A minor issue worried Johnny. Jakie Kim. Sherwood might keep him under cover where Miguel wouldn't see him. Johnny talked it over with Buck Perry.

Perry turned to Juan Romero. "Juan, get up early and ride to that clump o' cedars just this side of the Circle D gate. Watch to see if Jakie Kim comes out on his way back to town."

Chapter Nine

Empty Saddles

JOHNNY found a bunk and turned in. In the morning they let him sleep. When he awakened, Juan Romero had returned from his errand.

"Kim was there, *amigos*," Romero reported. "He rides out through the Circle D gate just after daybreak and goes toward Las Perdidas. Soon I see Miguel come out in his buggy. I ask if he told them about Johnny camping at the mountain spring. Miguel says yes, he did."

"Did he see Jakie Kim there?" Johnny asked.

"No," Romero said. "They kept Jakie out of sight."

Johnny grinned. "Good thing you checked on him, then. Otherwise I'd lose a bet to Flo Sawyer."

Buck Perry assembled provisions for a week. Bedrolls were packed. Johnny kept under cover all day. An hour after dark all of them set out for Wild Turkey Waterhole.

They left the main road at McBride Creek and rode up it to the canyon between Johnson and Horseshoe mesas. From this they turned to the right up a steep, single file trail. Ed Sopers took the lead. Juan Romero came last leading two pack horses. Brush slapped at Johnny's thighs and he wished he'd worn chaparajos. For an hour more they pushed on and up through the

dark, climbing toward the sheer façade of a rimrock.

A late moon was out when they came to an aspen park just under the rimrock.

Water gushed from a niche in the rock, making a small pool in an open acre of vega. Romero dismounted and lighted a lantern.

A cabin of slab rock centered the little vega. Hail had battered out its windowpanes and its stovepipe chimney was red with rust. Saddles and packs were taken inside.

"Hobble Johnny's horse and mare and leave 'em right here," Perry directed. "Juan, you take all the other broncs back to the ranch. Keep busy with the chores for the next week. Anybody comes by, tell 'em the outfit's over on the Chuquaak lookin' fer strays."

Well before dawn Juan Romero had departed with all the stock except Johnny's.

"Looks like we're gonna be crowded," Slim McBride remarked as he spread his bedroll on the floor. The cabin had only one room with a rusty iron stove in one corner.

"But here we are," Perry said grimly. "And everybody stays inside except Johnny. They peek outa the woods, they see Johnny and Johnny's broncs. Nothin' else."

Rifles were loaded and leaned against the walls. Each man had at least one Colt forty-five. The trap was set. Any crew of assassins who came here, expecting to find only Johnny Diamond, would meet warm reception.

McBride took the first watch and the others tried for a little sleep. The lantern was out now. From his blankets in the dark, Johnny chuckled and Chuck Wiggins wanted to know why.

"I was thinking of Flo Sawyer," Johnny said. "Miguel's back at the rancho by now and he's told her Jakie Kim wasn't at the Circle D. So she thinks she's rid of me. She figures I'll have to head back to Texas."

"Was that the bet?"

"That was it." Johnny chuckled again, then slipped into sleep.

BEFORE A DAY HAD PASSED Johnny knew it would be a tedious wait. And maybe the Circle D wouldn't come at all. While the others kept cover, Johnny exposed himself deliberately on the cabin steps. Occasionally he saw stock come to water at the pool. The entire mountainside seemed peaceful. Jaybirds chattered in the aspens.

He was more than nine thousand feet high here. Far below, reaching to the north and east horizons, stretched the Picketwire valley. A treeless valley, except for thin cottonwood lines where tributary creeks crossed it like veins in a leaf. But here on this high slope the timber was dense, banking steeply down from rimrock to plain. Grass grew lush in the timber and lusher still on the occasional benches jutting from the mountain. It made a fine summer stock range for all the valley ranches.

A salt trough lay near the pool. A dozen times during the day Johnny saw stock file from the timber to water there and to lick at the rocky chunks in the trough. Johnny saw Circle D brands, as well as Bar L and Lazy M. In the afternoon two small bands of horses came to the spring, snorting at sight of Johnny, yet drinking their fill before galloping back into timber.

Johnny kept an alert eye for colors. But there was no old mouse-colored mare.

Inside the cabin the others were playing seven-up. The only horses in sight were Johnny's, grazing hobbled in the open acre by the spring. By all external signs Johnny was the only one here.

Perry spoke to him through the half-open door. "If you hear anyone comin', turn a back flip and get inside. You're a sittin' duck, out there."

"Most likely he'll come at night," Johnny guessed, "figurin' to catch me asleep."

"Not if Sherwood sends a whole gang of 'em," Perry argued. "They'd just ride up in broad daylight and cut loose."

Johnny grinned. "I'll keep my eyes peeled, Buck."

Slim McBride opened some food cans and boiled some coffee. It was sundown and Johnny went inside. "What about those mesa outlaws I hear about?" he asked Perry. "Any chance they'd come by here?"

Perry didn't think so. "Mostly they stay on the New Mex side. And away west o' here."

"A few of 'em don't need to hide," Ed Sopers put in. "Not alla time, anyway. I mean guys with no local warrants out fer 'em. You'll find 'em driftin' down into Taos and Cimarron, for a few quick drinks. If they see their pitchers on a post office wall, they fade back to the tall timber."

"They lay off Las Perdidas, mostly," Dyke Dixon offered, "account of bein' scared of Adam Sawyer. But they'll take a chance at Chico, sometimes. I've seen 'em at Shotgun Orme's bar there."

"What do they live on?"

"Beef. Anybody's beef that comes along."

Rolled in his blankets that night, with Chuck Wiggins on watch for prowlers, Johnny considered the beef angle from the standpoint of hideaway outlaws. To what possible market could they drive off any large bunch?

A wholesale rustler, it seemed to Johnny, would need a solid base to work from. The Circle D was equipped like that.

A ten-percent shortage at recent roundups! It made too many cattle for hideaway outlaws to get away with. The existence of such outlaws offered convenient scapegoats.

Sherwood could be making the most of it. Even to the extent of staging a fake chase now and then. But proving it was something else. Rick Sherwood stood high on this range. He had the confidence of the county sheriff and Senator Ronaldo Rivera. He had a sincere girl like Flo Sawyer believing in him, admiring him, and perhaps on the verge of becoming his wife.

"Look, Chuck," Johnny said to the man on guard. "Didn't you tell me Sherwood started out six years ago with nothin' but a dugout in a sand bank?"

"He sure did," Wiggins confirmed. "And look at the spread he's got now! Somethin' funny about that, Johnny."

In the morning Johnny again exposed himself outside the cabin. He kept a forty-five in his belt and a saddle gun was never far from his hand. Slim McBride stood back of him just inside the open door.

"That's a sweet cow country down there, Slim," Johnny said, gazing out over the broad Picketwire valley.

"It sure is," McBride agreed. "See that green line off to the left? That's Grosella Creek. The Rivera place lays along it. Last year I homesteaded me a

quarter section right down in the middle of the senator's lower pasture. Built me a cabin on it. Aim to settle down there some day."

"Didn't the senator object?"

"Nope. He's got a lot of government land fenced inside that pasture. He told me he'd be glad to have me livin' down there. He knows I won't rustle his horses. And he figgers I'll make a pretty good watch-dog to keep other folks from doin' it."

This day passed like yesterday. No Circle D killers came to cut Johnny down. By evening he began to see doubt on the face of Buck Perry.

Another night and day went by and nothing happened. The Lazy M men began to look sheepish.

"Here we are," Dixon drawled, "all dressed up fer a fight and nothin' to shoot at."

"One time," Ed Sopers remarked on the fourth day of the vigil, "we took a tenderfoot out snipe huntin'. Left him holdin' the bag. That's kinder the way I feel now."

"This was the day," Dixon remembered the next morning, "I was supposed to irrigate the meadow. It sure needs it, too."

Perry stoked his pipe moodily. "Tell you what, Dyke. You might as well ride down and do it. There'd still be five of us. That ought to be enough. First time a bunch of Lazy M horses water at the spring, rope yourself a mount, Dyke."

Horses came to water at sundown. One was a little Lazy M mare with a colt by her side. Dyke tossed a loop over her. At dusk he disappeared down the trail, reducing the cabin garrison by one.

Another night slipped by and half of another day. Then, as Johnny was sunning himself on the cabin stoop, he heard shod hoofs ascending through the timber. He called back over his shoulder:

"*Cuidado*, you fellas. We got company."

A shuffle of boots in the cabin told him that four men were picking up carbines.

Whoever approached made no effort at secrecy. Hoofs clicked boldly on the gravel trail. Then the sounds of approach stopped. A minute of silence which followed seemed ominous.

"They're peekin' out of the brush," Johnny guessed aloud, "to make sure I'm alone here."

Buck Perry spoke cautiously from a window. "They've had time to see you by now. Better step back inside."

Johnny turned back into the cabin but left the door open. Chuck Wiggins, with a rifle, was crouching below one window. Perry had a post at the other window. Slim McBride stood near the door with a saddle carbine. Ed Sopers had a forty-five in each hand and a fighting glint in his eyes.

"There they are," Wiggins reported from his window. "Right out in the open now. Seven of 'em!"

Seven to five! But the oncomers would think only Johnny Diamond was here. It gave him an advantage.

"Cover me," Johnny said, and exposed himself in the open door.

Seven horsemen were riding toward him across the untimbered acre of vega. Six seemed to be gringos and one a Mexican. The Mexican looked faintly familiar. They all wore guns and had hard hostile faces. One of them had a stubble of black beard and came slightly in the lead.

They halted abreast about six paces in front of the cabin. The bearded man

fixed an insolent stare on Johnny. "Your name Diamond?"

"That's right," Johnny admitted. "Who are *you?*"

"We're undertakers," the bearded man announced. A titter ran along his line of companions. "How you wanta be buried, kid? Face down or face up?"

A gun appeared in his hand and he leveled it to an aim on Johnny. Johnny ducked, but didn't need to. A rifle shot came from Wiggins's window, echoed by a shrill curse from the bearded man. The forty-five bounced from his hand and blood spurted from his wrist.

McBride and Sopers came catapulting out, shooting. Shots boomed from six saddles and a slug burned skin at Johnny's neck. He was on his knees, now, tripping his own trigger. He saw rearing horses and smoke. Lead spurted from two windows and Buck Perry's voice cracked like a bullwhacker's whip: "Blast 'em, Chuck. Get that guy on the end."

The man on the end doubled over his saddle horn, then slithered to the ground. The rider next to him took a bullet from Slim McBride, but kept shooting. Ed Sopers, badly hit, stumbled and fell face down. Johnny tripped his trigger again and got only a click. He dropped his gun and picked up Sopers's. But Perry appeared at the open door with a rifle stock at his cheek. He swept it in an arc down the line of horses, firing six times. Every saddle was empty now. A man on all fours under his horse had a blood-smeared face. "Don't shoot!" he begged.

"Nothin' left to shoot at," Perry said grimly, and lowered his rifle.

Johnny got groggily to his feet. Every man of the invaders was either down or dead.

"Only trouble is," Buck Perry said soberly, "they ain't Circle D's."

Johnny blinked at him. "Not Circle D's? Who are they?"

"Townies from Chico. Looks like Sheriff Sawyer was right, Johnny. The Circle D ain't after you. It's Orme's crowd from Chico."

Ed Sopers had a bullet-smashed leg. The only other casualty on Johnny's side was the nick on his own neck. Blood from it drenched his shirt but he felt nothing. Orme's crowd! How could anyone but the Circle D have known he was here?

Of the seven attackers, three were dead and two wounded. The other pair had simply thrown down their guns in surrender. One of the dead men was a Mexican. Johnny took the droopy black hat from his head and saw that he was Diego Salvador, the man who, almost certainly, had tried to knife him at the hotel after killing Frankie Valdez. The sheriff had held him in jail under suspicion, but, lacking evidence, had apparently released him.

"Orme musta sent this gang to get you, Johnny," Perry insisted. "Looks like Sherwood didn't have a thing to do with it."

The leader, he with the black stubble of beard, had only a broken gun wrist. "Name's Dade," Slim announced. "I saw him dealin' blackjack at Chico one time. Here's two guys that ain't hit. What'll I do with 'em, boss?"

"Tie 'em up, Slim. Then fork a horse and ride for the sheriff. Tell him he'd better bring a buckboard and a coupla deputies."

When the prisoners were wrist-bound and the wounded were carried inside, Slim picked what looked like the fastest of the Chico horses. Mounting, he spurred down the mountain.

Chuck Wiggins took three tarps from as many bedrolls and covered the dead men. Perry took a look at Sopers's leg. The bone was shattered above the knee.

"Could you hang on, Ed," Perry asked gently, "if we hoisted you to a saddle?"

Sopers nodded. Chuck selected another of the Chico mounts and Johnny helped him get Sopers astride of it.

"Chuck," Perry directed, "you lead him down to the ranch, careful like. Pick up old Doc Guttierez as you go through San Ysidro. And send Juan Romero back up here with our saddle stock."

When Chuck rode down the trail, leading Ed's mount, only Johnny and Buck Perry were left of the original cabin garrison. Perry spent the rest of the day quizzing prisoners.

"Who hired you to come up here and gun Johnny Diamond?"

"Nobody."

"Was it Orme?"

"No."

"Was it Sherwood?"

"No."

"Val Cranston?"

"Don't know him." In general the responses were sullen.

"Who the hell was it then?"

"We ain't got nothin' to say, mister."

Perry searched them, found nothing which could tie them to either Orme or Sherwood. When dark came Johnny moved his blankets outside and made a campfire. He sat up late over it, with Buck Perry.

"If the Circle D had showed up," Perry brooded, "everything would dovetail fine. But these Chico toughs ball it all up. Go back to the start, Johnny, and give me the whole play."

So Johnny began with the raid in Texas, six years ago. His father and brothers murdered by three unknown raiders. The stock driven off, including an eight-year-old brood mare. A four-year-old with the same markings now in the possession of Val Cranston, and branded Circle D. Linked Diamonds boots carried away by one of those Texas raiders. Inquiry at Chico about those boots leading promptly to the murder of a bootblack there, and an attempt on Johnny's life. The incident at Thacker and its possible connection with the killing of José Pacheco at San Ysidro. The shot fired at Johnny on the Sawyer front porch, probably by one Jakie Kim who the next day rode hard to the Circle D.

"So we set a trap for the Circle D," Buck summed up, "and instead we ketch a netful o' gunnies from Chico. I guess maybe your hunch about Sherwood was all haywire, Johnny."

"Let's keep our fingers crossed on that," Johnny said.

ANOTHER NIGHT AND DAY of waiting and then a buckboard came toiling up the steepness of the mountain. At its wheel rode Adam Sawyer, his gaunt face dark and stern. Two deputies and a doctor came with him.

The floodgates of wrath opened first on Johnny Diamond. "Who the hell appointed you sheriff in this county, young man?"

"Nobody," Johnny said. "I was just campin' here, peaceful-like, when some guys rode up with guns. They asked whether I wanted to be buried face up or face down. Then they began shooting. What would *you* do in a case like

that, Sheriff?"

"None of your impudence," Sawyer stormed. "Where are the bodies?"

A look at the dead men mollified him a little. "Humph! Diego Salvador. Pinkie Thompson. Jabe Meggs. The backwash of Chico. A good riddance, I'll admit, even if you weren't very legal about it."

He took Buck Perry aside and held a moody talk with him. Then he began grilling the prisoners. Their sullen defiance ruffled him again. "Patch 'em up, Doc, and we'll haul 'em to town. They're under arrest for attempted murder."

He turned to Johnny with a grim mouth. "One good thing came out of this, after all, young man."

"What?" Johnny asked.

"It gets us rid of you," Sawyer snapped. "Soon as I use you as a witness, you head straight back to Texas. Unless you want to welsh on a bet you made with my daughter."

"A bet which I won," Johnny said.

"A bet you lost," Sawyer corrected severely.

"What makes you think so, Sheriff?"

"Because Jakie Kim did *not* go to the Circle D. That was the bet, Flo tells me."

"He showed up there, didn't he?"

"Not according to Rick Sherwood. Flo asked Rick about it and Rick said Jakie Kim has never set foot on the Circle D. More than that, a Bar L *mozo* named Miguel was there that night. He also says Kim wasn't there."

A rider leading saddled horses emerged from the timber. Johnny saw that he was Juan Romero of the Lazy M. Romero was arriving with the stock needed to take men and bedrolls back to Perry's ranch.

Johnny called to him. "Come over here, Juan."

The Spanish cowboy joined them.

"Tell the sheriff," Johnny prompted, "what you saw at daybreak the morning Miguel left the Circle D."

Juan faced Adam Sawyer. "I am watching from piñons, señor, near the Circle D gate. I see Jakie Kim come out and ride toward Las Perdidas. Soon then I see a buggy come out. Miguel is in it. I ask him if he has seen Kim at the bunkhouse and he says no."

Sawyer shrugged irritably. "Sherwood and Miguel say one thing, Romero, and you say another. Someone's lying."

A hard glint sparked Romero's eyes but his answer came softly. "Are you suggesting, Señor Sheriff, that it is *I* who lies?"

"Very well," Sawyer conceded, "let's just say someone's mistaken. Kim could have been on the ranch without Sherwood knowing it. It's a big place with ten or twelve cowhands. Not that it makes any great difference." He turned back to Johnny. "You can't positively identify Kim, I understand, as the man who shot at you from the dark?"

"No," Johnny admitted. "But if his errand to the Circle D was on the level, why did Sherwood keep him under cover and then lie about him being there?"

Sawyer brooded darkly for a moment. Then he summoned one of his deputies and Buck Perry.

"See here, Buck," he said, "I'm tired of all these charges and counter charges about the Circle D. Three attempts have been made on Johnny Diamond's life. One in a hotel room, one in front of my house, one here at this cabin. Young Diamond here, on a flimsy hunch, tries to connect it with two

reputable citizens, Cranston and Sherwood. So I'm going to bring the whole thing out in the open."

"How you aim to do that, Sheriff?" Perry queried.

"By airing all testimony at an open hearing in my office. We'll set it for one o'clock day after tomorrow. I want everyone there whose name has been mentioned in connection with the several attempts on Johnny Diamond's life. That means every survivor who took part in this gun fight. It means Rick Sherwood and the crew who helped him load cattle at Thacker. It means Jakie Kim and Miguel, and even my own daughter because she saw Kim on his alleged trip toward the Circle D. Val Cranston must be there too. And Syd Orme from Chico. Is that clear?"

"Ed Sopers," Perry objected, "can't very well be there. He's got a busted leg."

"Very well. We'll excuse Sopers. But everyone else be there. One o'clock day after tomorrow at my courthouse office."

Sawyer turned to a deputy. "Mason, find Sherwood and serve notice on him. Then pick up Kim and Orme. I'll see Cranston myself. Now let's everybody get out of here."

Chapter Ten

Johnny Pulls His Punch

ARRIVING at the Lazy M, Johnny found that Ed Sopers's leg had been set by an old Spanish medico from San Ysidro. That night he sat up late with Perry's crew, speculating on what might be brought out at Sawyer's open hearing in town.

"It's got me in a tailspin," Perry admitted. "Ad lays everything on Orme and his Chico gunnies. You can't blame him, either. The Circle D angle's thin, any way you look at it."

"I do not agree, señor." This in a calm, deferent tone from Juan Romero. "The Circle D has lied about Jakie Kim being there."

The crew took sides, only Romero and Wiggins leaning toward support of Johnny's theory. Wiggins was a member of the outfit now, having been signed on to ride for Perry at least during Sopers's convalescence. "Those ten-percent roundup shortages," Chuck kept pointing out. "And Sherwood starting from a dugout in a sandbank only six years ago."

Johnny lay restless, that night, rehashing the evidence. As Perry said, it was pretty thin. And entirely circumstantial. Against it stood Sherwood's high repute as a stockman. No jury would be impressed by it. Even Buck Perry had his fingers crossed. It just wasn't strong enough, Johnny admitted. He'd have to dig up something else.

In the morning he turned his bay mare loose in Perry's horse pasture. Hackamore wanted to stay there too, and showed temper when Johnny tossed on a saddle.

"I'm hittin' for town. See you fellas tomorrow at the sheriff's office."

"We'll be there," Perry promised. "And keep your eyes open as you ride in, Johnny. Plenty of dry gulches between here and town. What happened three times could happen again."

Johnny grinned. "I can take care of myself, Buck. So long."

He cantered up San Ysidro Creek and turned west on the main road. Clouds hung low this morning, obscuring the

sun and clustered in gray rolls against the mesa rimrocks. They made the steep upslope to his left dark and forbidding. To his right the level sea of grama stretched to infinity. A jackrabbit zigzagged down the trail ahead.

Johnny rode alertly, eyes sweeping the horizons: This range was alive with men who were saving bullets for him. Any arroyo could hide a cocked rifle.

The first one was McBride Creek, and Johnny scouted his approach to it cautiously. A small bunch of Buck Perry's cows scattered as he rode down into its bed. A mile beyond he met a string of burros driven by a Mexican on foot, heading for San Ysidro.

A drop of rain spanked his face as he came to a rise from which he could see the purple ribbon of the Rivera meadows. A week ago the senator had been in Denver, but he might be home by now. And somehow Johnny felt a complete trust for the man.

He came opposite the gate and paused there, still uncertain. Felicia Rivera, he thought, would hardly welcome him now. She'd resent his indictment of Val Cranston. Chances were she had a romantic understanding with Cranston, or expected to have one soon. And who was Johnny Diamond? Just an upstart stranger who'd appeared suddenly from nowhere to turn her world upside down. She'd be courteous, no doubt, but coldly so.

Johnny looked up the long ranch street at the indolent life in sight there. A fat vaquero sat on the well coping, encouraging two roosters to fight. A chubby Mexican boy was teasing a milch calf. A woman was hanging red peppers in front of her jacal. The old peonage system existed here, Johnny sensed. A kindly and paternal form of slavery where the help was paid no wages in money, but could call at the bodega for beans or beef or calico or anything else it needed. When the master summoned, they obeyed. Hay hands went to the fields and vaqueros rode lazily to the roundups. A fandango every Saturday night, all the chokecherry wine they could drink, and a priest at the ranch church to hold mass for them. What more could a peon want?

Yet help like that, Johnny thought, could hardly be expected to be vigilant or aggressive against outlaws and rustlers. If a roundup tallied a ten percent shortage, they'd shrug and murmur, "*Que lastima, patron!*" A perfect setup for Rick Sherwood, whenever he wanted to ship a few cars of Bar L beef from Thacker. Especially with the senator away most of the time attending sessions of the legislature.

The teased calf got away from the boy and came galloping, tail high, out through the gate. When the boy gave chase Johnny asked him, "Has Don Ronaldo returned from Denver?"

"*Todavia no*," the boy said.

Johnny rode on toward town. Shortly he topped a ridge of piñons and rode down into Frijoli Arroyo. Its bed was wide, deep, and flood-gutted, but almost dry now.

A quarter mile up the bed Johnny saw a band of horses. They were watering there, and at sight of Johnny they went racing upstream where a bend in the bank obscured them.

But Johnny had glimpsed a spot of color. An animal colored like a field mouse and with four white stockings. It needed a closer look. Johnny spurred Hackamore up on the bank and loped along the arroyo.

The horses emerged from the creek bed and galloped toward scrub-oak

foothills. Johnny could see it was a band of range mares led by a half-wild stallion. His pulse quickened when again he saw white stockings under mousey flanks. An old mare, he was almost certain of it now. She lagged a bit behind the others.

Johnny raced on. Maybe he could cut her out. The band was now veering upslope into scrub oak. There the stallion stopped, whirled about, snorting, while the mares raced on. Against his defense, cutting out even an old once-tame mare wouldn't be easy.

They were only a hundred yards ahead, but brush nearly obscured them now. Then, far to his left, Johnny saw a small Mexican plaza, three or four adobes at the mouth of Frijoli Canyon.

Abandoning pursuit for the time being, Johnny loped toward that plaza. An ancient Mexican was mending a saddle at a shed there.

"May I borrow a reata, señor?" Johnny asked him. "Here is ten pesos until I return it."

The old man produced a hand-woven lariat. Johnny coiled it over his saddle horn and rode back to the chase. He could hear the mares crashing through brush high up the slope.

They led him upward into pine and thence on into aspen. The old mare was lagging again. Johnny uncoiled his rope and made ready to throw. Brush cheated him. But he saw the old mare's flank. His heart thumped as he made out a brand there. Linked Diamonds!

"She's our own stuff, Hackamore," Johnny exulted. "We'll catch her if it takes a week."

Age made it hard for the mare to keep up. Again the stallion doubled back, snorting, biting her flank, bullying her ahead with the others. Hackamore, under Johnny's weight, was all but winded himself. Johnny forced him to a spurt up the last steep climb. There he got within thirty feet of his quarry and made a desperate throw.

The loop missed by inches and the old mare plunged on into the rimrock brush. Johnny recoiled his rope and grimly resumed the pursuit.

AN AFTERNOON LATER, at one o'clock sharp, Sheriff Adam Sawyer opened a hearing at his courthouse office. The room was jammed and only a few of the witnesses found chairs. The fleshy hulk of Syd Orme overflowed one of them. He sat there, calm and derisive, his great hairy arms folded over the barrel of his chest, more like an amused spectator than a culprit.

His chins hung in bags and his eyes, sly slits of malice, leered as he greeted Rick Sherwood of the Circle D. "What's this I hear, Rick, about you rustlin' steers in carload lots?"

Sherwood, his raw wind-burned face tight with fury, ignored him. The entire range knew that a young upstart from Texas had conjured up monstrous charges against the Circle D. Charges which involved also the integrity of Brand Inspector Val Cranston.

Cranston stood by with a confused look, a flush on his soft, plump cheeks. His eyes evaded Flo Sawyer's when she looked at him. Others present included five Circle D riders—those who had assisted in the last two loadings at Thacker. Survivors of the fight at the mountain cabin were there. And Jakie Kim. Perry was there with all the Lazy M crew except Ed Sopers. The coroner

stood by to select witnesses for his own inquest later. Flo Sawyer sat at her father's desk, ready to take notes.

Adam Sawyer paced the floor. He looked impatiently at his watch. The key witness hadn't appeared yet and his truancy annoyed the sheriff.

He strode to a window and scowled out at the street. A long line of saddle horses was tethered at racks there. But not the hackamored dun of Johnny Diamond.

"While we wait for him," Sawyer announced as he turned back to the roomful of men, "let's clear up the Jakie Kim angle. Jakie, my daughter saw you riding east toward San Ysidro. It was eight days ago. Where were you going?"

The answer came glibly from Kim. "To McBride Creek, Sheriff."

"Where on McBride Creek?"

"A sheepherder named Pedro has a shack there. About a mile off the road. That's where I went."

"What for?"

"He owes me some money. I went there to collect."

"Can you prove it?"

"Don't reckon I can," Kim admitted. "Pedro wasn't home. So I camped all night at his shack and the next day rode back to town."

"You didn't go to the Circle D?"

"Heck no. What would I go there for, Sheriff?"

"He lies, señor." It was the voice of Juan Romero breaking in. "I myself saw him come from the Circle D gate."

A chorus of denials burst from the Circle D men present. They all swore that Kim had never been to the Circle D.

Sawyer looked questioningly at Rick Sherwood. "If he was there," Sherwood said stiffly, "I never saw him."

Miguel the Bar L *mozo* offered his bit. "I myself am there that night, señor. And I do not see this man."

Sawyer frowned darkly at Romero. "*You* say he was there. But seven men say he wasn't."

Buck Perry offered, "Juan's worked for me a long time, Ad, and I never knew him to tell anything but the truth."

A tension grew. The Lazy M's looked coldly at the Circle D's. The Circle D's glared back. None of them, at the moment, wore guns.

Sawyer faced Kim again. "Why did you follow Johnny Diamond to my house, nine evenings ago?"

"I didn't."

"Someone took a shot at him there. He thinks it was you."

Kim licked a split upper lip. "Thinkin' ain't provin', Sheriff."

"He thinks you lit out for the Circle D, next morning, with a message from Cranston to Sherwood."

"He's just loco, Sheriff."

Sawyer nodded. "On that score I think he is too. I think you're Orme's man, not Cranston's. But when he shows up, we'll let him speak for himself."

Sawyer looked from the window, his eyes searching the street for Johnny Diamond. "We'll give him another hour to get here." He turned savagely to Syd Orme. "Just why," he demanded, "did you send a gang of killers up to that mountain cabin?"

Orme chuckled derisively. "What makes you think I did, Sheriff?"

"*Someone* did. They were all Chico gunmen. One of them was your man Diego Salvador."

"Diego was just a customer of mine," the fat man asserted. "Same as everybody else in Chico."

Sawyer harangued him for blistering minutes. "That dive of yours," he shouted, "has always been a hangout for thieves and cutthroats. Someday I'll put a rope around your fat neck, Syd Orme."

"Not without more to go on," Orme jeered back, "than you got now."

Sawyer shifted his attack to the black-stubbled gunman, Dade, who'd led the attack on the cabin. "If Orme didn't send you up there, why did you go?"

Although Dade's answer didn't convince a single man in the room, it couldn't be disproved. "We had a few drinks, Sheriff. We heard this brash kid was up there and we figgered to have a little fun with him. Didn't mean him any harm. Then all of a sudden the Lazy M jumps out on us and starts throwin' lead."

"Who told you young Diamond was up there?"

"Don't know his name. Some *hombre* we met at a waterhole."

That was Dade's story and he stuck to it.

Sawyer turned with a sardonic apology to Rick Sherwood. "Rick, we mustn't be too hard on young Diamond. At Chico he probed into guilt. No doubt of it. Guilt of his father's murder in Texas six years ago. He asked about a pair of Linked Diamonds boots and right away the lid blew off. Knives and bullets started coming his way. His only mistake is trying to connect *you* with it. The truth is that all the guilt belongs right at Chico."

"Not all of it, Sheriff."

The voice was Johnny Diamond's. They looked up and saw him standing in the doorway. His face and shirt were scratched as though he'd been dragged through buckthorn brush.

"Where," Sawyer demanded sharply, "have you been?"

"Rounding up proof," Johnny said. He looked straight at Rick Sherwood. "And I've got it."

"Proof?" Sherwood echoed. His cleft chin quivered. "Of what?"

"That you're a two-timin' horse thief," Johnny said.

The Circle D man stiffened. His muscles flexed as though to make a dive for Johnny. Veins of blue fury stood out on his neck.

Sawyer stepped quickly in between them. "Watch out, young man," he warned. "I've seen men killed for saying that. What horse are you talking about?"

"Come out to the front walk," Johnny invited, "and I'll show you." He left the room and walked down the hall, spurs clinking on the board floor.

Adam Sawyer stared for a moment, then followed. Only the prisoners being held for the assault on the mountain cabin, and two deputies in charge of them, remained in the office. Even these crowded to windows.

They could see Buck Perry on the front walk, standing between Chuck Wiggins and Slim McBride. A little to the left stood Rick Sherwood, flanked by Alf Sansone and Ferd Smith. The others were all there, the black-shocked, homely head of Sawyer looming above all others.

Lined up at the hitchracks were the saddle horses on which witnesses had arrived for the hearing. But one animal wasn't saddled and it was to this one which Johnny Diamond drew attention.

"Most of you," Johnny was saying, "are stockmen. Couple of you look at her teeth and tell us how old she is."

Buck Perry stepped forward. He put

his hands on the jaw of an old mouse-colored mare and forced her teeth open. The mare was tied to the rack by the lead rope with which Johnny had led her in from the range.

Everyone gaped while Perry inspected the teeth, no one more avidly than a slim, spectacled man with a notebook in hand. He was Frank Sully, editor of the Picketwire *Daily Roundup*.

"She's around fourteen year old," Perry announced.

"Look at her brand," Johnny invited.

The brand, though old and hair-grown, was easily read by all. It was Linked Diamonds, matching the design around the tops of Johnny's boots. Frank Sully scribbled eagerly in his notebook.

"Cranston," Johnny inquired, "you don't mind if I offsaddle your bronc, do you?"

He'd tied the mare directly beside the mount on which Val Cranston had ridden to the hearing. Without waiting for a response, Johnny stripped saddle and blanket from the back of a four-year-old gelding. The animal's brand was clearly seen to be Circle D.

Johnny faced his audience with a challenge. "Like I said, you men are stockmen. If you met these two broncs in the Maine woods, what would you say? You'd say they were mare and foal, wouldn't you? Look at their breeding. Both Morgans. Look at their markings, hair by hair."

Everybody looked. Each beast was the color of a field mouse with four knee-high white stockings. Each had a white star on its forehead. The mare was ten years older than the horse, but each had the same shape of head and slant of eye. Long-tailed, both of them.

There they stood, flank to flank, under the eyes of men who knew horses.

Even Adam Sawyer was impressed. Yet he was a lawyer and he knew the law of the range. He stated it succinctly to Johnny Diamond. "You don't identify the parentage of livestock, young man, by family resemblance. Two things, and two only, are admissible in fixing the ownership of a horse. Its brand, if the horse is past weaning age. If the horse is under weaning age, then ownership is determined by the brand of the mare it follows. Since this colt is four years old, you're about three years too late, Johnny Diamond."

Legally, no one could deny him. No court in the land would award the mousey gelding to the mousey mare.

Yet—there they stood, matching each other hair by hair. Johnny read conviction in more eyes than Buck Perry's.

Johnny unhitched Hackamore and mounted. "The mare," he said, "was stolen by whoever killed my father six years ago. Read the brand on her colt, Sheriff, and draw your own conclusion."

His gaze went to Rick Sherwood. Sherwood stood frozen there, his hands clenched. It was Alf Sansone who started for Johnny, livid, and it was the strong right arm of Adam Sawyer which swept him back.

"Keep your shirts on, you Circle D's. First man who starts a fight gets tossed in jail."

Back of them all, on the courthouse lawn, stood Flo Sawyer. Only a wise town ordinance, Flo knew, checked an immediate holocaust on this spot. No one but the sheriff was armed. But tomorrow, on the open range, it would be different. Trigger fingers were itching and chips were on shoulders. A pinch of salt, after today, would be

worth more than Johnny's life.

He saw Flo there and smiled, touching a hand to his hatbrim. Then he spoke to Buck Perry. "Buck, I'll leave this old mare at the livery barn. Would you mind takin' her home with you? You can turn her loose in your pasture."

As Perry nodded, Jakie Kim let out a yelp. The little hoodlum jumped back to the walk, slapping a hand to his cheek. He had crowded up too close to the hitchrack and Johnny's dun horse, never friendly with strangers, had taken a nip at him. Kim cursed the horse, and a guffaw came from Syd Orme.

Johnny's voice rose above it, "Anyone wants me, I'll be at the hotel."

He took the old mare's lead rope and rode down High Street, leading her toward the livery barn.

Then he got a break. One he hadn't expected. Ten yards away, the old mare turned her head, looked back at Cranston's horse, and gave a low whimpering whinny. A whinny in response came from the four-year-old. As though mare and foal had recognized each other three years after weaning, each now offering a protest at being separated again.

Johnny rode on, and the crowd on the walk stared after him. Sawyer, with a let-down look on his face, seemed on the point of calling him back. Johnny Diamond had pulled his main punch. He'd said nothing at all about crooked cattle shipments from Thacker. He'd made no charge that the Circle D had inspired an attack on a mountain cabin. He'd done nothing at all except bring in an old mare and tie her beside a horse branded Circle D, now owned by Val Cranston.

Cranston, with a stunned look, was now restoring a saddle to that horse. It was then that the lawyer in Adam Sawyer made him feel his first grudging admiration for Johnny. The boy had made his case stronger, not weaker, by omitting the intangibles. By sticking to a visible fact, that two equines looked alike and were, in all probability, mare and foal.

"The hearing," Sawyer announced in a tired voice, "is dismissed."

By then, around the corner on Commercial, Johnny was unsaddling at the livery barn. He took his saddle roll from the cantle and carried it to the hotel. They gave him the same room he'd had before.

In it he bathed and shaved. His face stung from brush scratches, after the long chase across the mesas.

The shave and a cigarette made him feel better. He thought back over the courthouse scene, wondering how much of an impression he'd made. He remembered Flo on the lawn there and the stark distress on her face. For whom had she been distressed? Rick Sherwood? Would she still believe in the man?

A buckskin, Sherwood claimed, was the mother of Cranston's horse. Could Sherwood produce that buckskin? Whether he could or not, his entire crew would back him up. For if the man had made crooked shipments from Thacker, his ranch hands had to be in on it. No shipper could conceal an operation like that from his own men.

Toughies, according to Wiggins and Perry. Their toughness explained by the Circle D's need to arm itself against mesa rustlers. Conveniently logical, Johnny thought with a smile. He couldn't dismiss the fact that they'd lied about Kim's overnight stay there. And only the Circle D's could have known about Johnny being at a moun-

tain cabin. Miguel had planted such information at the Circle D and nowhere else.

Yet the raiders who'd come were Orme's gang at Chico. Was there a hidden tieup between Sherwood and Orme?

Johnny sat on the bed and rolled another cigarette. He was lighting it when someone knocked on the door.

He opened it and found Alf Sansone standing there. A barber had trimmed away the man's shagginess. But his cold, flat face had blotches on it and his eyes were bloodshot. Liquor was strong on his breath. He wore no visible gun.

"You talk a lot, kid."

"It's a free country," Johnny said.

"Not here in town," Sansone corrected. "They won't even let a man wear his gun. If they did, I'd've drilled you right there on the courthouse walk."

"Some other day, then?" Johnny suggested pleasantly.

"You get it," he was warned, "the first time you ride out on the range."

"You'll tend to it personally?" Johnny asked him.

He looked at the man's cruel mouth and a thought came to him. Alf Sansone, more than anyone else he'd met here, looked the part of a ruthless killer. He might even be one of the three raiders of the Lampasas massacre, six years ago.

"Personally," Sansone promised with an accented malice. "I'll fill you full of lead and leave you for the buzzards."

"You'll put pennies on my eyes," Johnny suggested, "and then steal my boots?" He glanced significantly down at his own Linked Diamonds boots.

A mistake because it left an opening. Sansone drove a fast punch to his chin. Johnny was knocked halfway across the room and his head struck a bed post. He fell senseless on the floor.

Chapter Eleven

The Senator Is Suspicious

DUSK had fallen when a two-horse cab drew up in front of the Toltec Hotel. Its fare had just disembarked from a train.

He was a small thin gentleman with a goatee. *A cigaritta* was compressed between his lips. "*Gracias, Senador.*" The cabman accepted his tip with a deferent bow.

As the fare entered the hotel, the face of the clerk there showed the same deference. "We are honored, Don Ronaldo. *Bien venida.*" He whirled the registry book and extended a quill pen.

Senator Rivera shook his head. "I come only," he announced, "to see a guest of yours. One Johnny Diamond."

"He's in room 206, Senator. I'll call him."

"Never mind, if you please. I will go up to his room myself." Rivera started for the steps, but midway there he saw a newsboy who'd just entered with papers to sell.

It was an extra edition of the Picketwire *Roundup*, hot off the press. A glaring headline caught the senator's eye. He bought a paper and sat down in a lobby chair.

At the legislature in Denver, rumors had reached him about a sensation in his own district. It had troubled the senator. Was not Rick Sherwood a suitor for the favor of his own niece, Flo Sawyer? And was not the other name mentioned, Val Cranston, one of

his own appointees? More than that, only a month ago Señor Cranston had made clear his intentions toward Felicia Rivera.

So the senator had rushed homeward by the first train.

Anxiously skimming through the sensation printed in this paper, he briefed himself on details. There'd been three attempts on the life of Johnny Diamond. Johnny's family had been wiped out six years ago by three unknown raiders, who'd stolen an old mare and a pair of boots. Today the mare had turned up at the local courthouse, with an alleged colt bearing the brand of Circle D.

On debatable points the account was cautious. "The young Texan alleges that . . ." "His rather fantastic theory is . . ." Under such cover was presented the idea of Sherwood stealing cattle, in car lots, with the connivance of a brand inspector.

"*Carramba!*" muttered Don Ronaldo.

His faith in Rick Sherwood remained unshaken. Of Cranston he wasn't so sure. And after all it was Cranston who wanted to marry his own daughter.

Retaining his dignity only with a supreme effort, Don Ronaldo dropped his paper and went marching up the stairs. When he came to room 206 he found its door wide open.

Inside he saw Johnny Diamond lying on the floor. The senator stood staring for a moment. He stooped and put a hand over Johnny's heart. There was a beat of life. No blood was in sight. The senator poured water from a china pitcher into a bowl, soaked a towel in it and swabbed the victim's head. A lump there indicated a blow.

Johnny opened his eyes. A pallid smile reassured Rivera. "I will call a doctor, señor."

"Don't bother," Johnny murmured. "I'm all right. No use makin' a fuss about it." He staggered to his feet and sat on the bed.

"You have been fighting, señor?"

Johnny grimaced. "You might call it that. There was only one punch and the other guy threw it."

"Who was he?" the senator demanded.

"Rides for the Circle D. Fella named Sansone."

Distress lined Rivera's face. He closed the door and made Johnny lie down. He himself took a chair and lighted a *cigaritta*.

"By the newspaper, señor, I see you have insulted the Circle D. Perhaps one cannot blame them if they are mad when you call them rustlers."

"Reckon you're right," Johnny conceded. "Anybody talked like that about me, I'd get mad myself. Just the same I'm not takin' anything back."

"I have read what has happened here. Is there anything you wish to add?"

"I came here," Johnny told him, "looking for an old mare and a pair of boots. Boots like these." He pointed to his own. "I found the mare. But I haven't turned up the boots yet."

Rivera questioned him at length, drawing out a few details which hadn't been covered by the news story.

"I have great trust," he said broodingly, "for Rick Sherwood. But there is one small thing which gives me doubt about Señor Cranston."

Johnny sat up and looked shrewdly at Rivera. "Bet I can guess, Senator. Sherwood asked you to get the appointment for Cranston, three years ago. So you got it just to accommodate a neighbor."

"That much is true," Rivera admitted, "but it is something else which

disturbs me, señor."

"Call me Johnny."

"*Muy bien*, Johnny." Don Ronaldo's face clouded again. "It is about Ernesto. Have they told you of Ernesto?"

For a moment Johnny couldn't remember. Then he recalled the young Indian, a foster son of the senator's, now a renegade hiding from the law.

"What about him?" Johnny asked.

The subject was clearly painful to Rivera. "It is a matter I never speak of," he murmured, "and it has brought much shame and sorrow to our house. But now we must face it, bravely. We must find Ernesto. We must learn what it is that he knows about Señor Cranston."

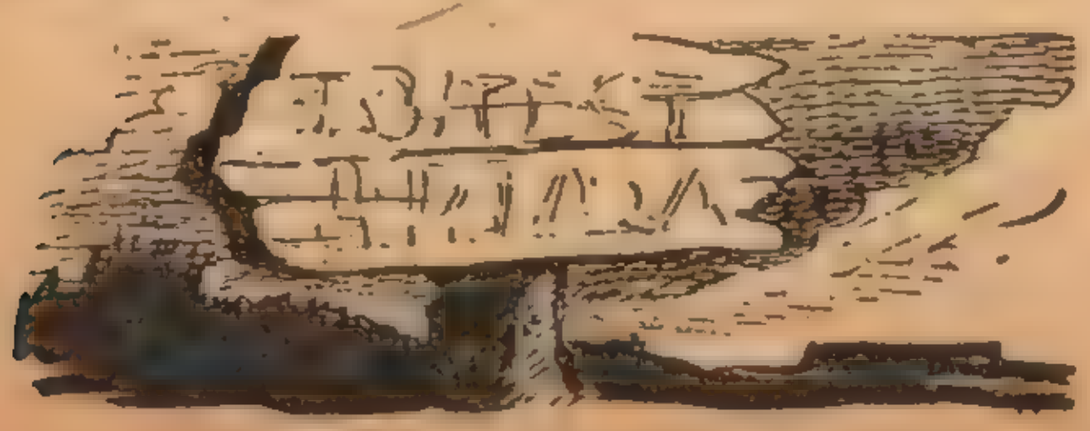
"You mean he had something on Cranston?"

"There is reason to think so, Johnny. It is a thing so delicate that I cannot mention it to my good friend and brother-in-law, the sheriff. For if I send the sheriff to see Ernesto, duty would demand that he arrest him for murder."

Don Ronaldo stared bitterly into space, Johnny felt sorry for him. This *hacendado* was a proud man and the humiliation of Ernesto's disgrace must have been a hard pill to swallow.

"You know where he is, Senator?"

"No, I have not seen or heard from him since he became a fugitive nearly a year ago. But there is a possibility he may be at a certain place on a certain day." A pleading came into Rivera's tone. "Would you go there with me, Señor Johnny?"



"Sure," Johnny agreed promptly. "But where?"

"To a place called *El Canyon de los Muertos*."

A sinister name, Johnny thought. The Canyon of the Dead! "Is it far from here?"

Rivera shook his head. "I tell you this only," he admitted, "because I need you to go with me there. And because if you are right about Cranston, you will have great zeal in helping me find Ernesto."

"I'll keep my mouth shut about it," Johnny promised.

"What I tell you first," Rivera said sadly, "is known to everyone. The great battle of long ago in a deep, dead-end canyon near San Ysidro. The vaqueros of my rancho, and of other ranches of the valley, were on one side; on the other side were Indians who had raided our ponies and our cattle. We trapped them in that canyon and every Indian raider was killed. So also was a squaw with them. But we found her papoose alive there, a boy baby which I took home to my ranch. I adopted him legally and he grew up as my son, Ernesto."

Johnny nodded. Adam Sawyer had told that much.

"He caused me much grief," Rivera went on. "He rebelled at discipline and would not go to school. As a boy he often rode into the mountains and was gone for weeks we knew not where. Then he would be home again, telling us nothing, as stolid as his forefathers. Sometimes he rode to town to drink and throw dice in the bars. One virtue he had: he was devoted to his foster sister Felicia. And she still loves him very much."

"He learned about the Canyon of the Dead?"

"We could not keep it from him, Johnny. And it drew him apart from us. Sometimes I think it made him hate all of us except Felicia. On the sixteenth anniversary of the fight in *El Canyon de los Muertos*, he rode there and camped where we'd buried the dead of his people. He built a great pyre of stones, like a shrine. And on top of it he made a fire of black smoke, kept it burning from sunrise to sunset, and stood there by it, arms folded, like a stern sentinel.

"Again a year later he went there and did the same. Each year he went there to watch and to grieve and to build his fire on the stones. The twenty-first anniversary, Señor Johnny, will be day after tomorrow. So I think he will go there again."

"Likely he will," Johnny agreed soberly. "But would he let us ride up to him?"

"He will not fire his rifle at me, who raised him from infancy. Nor at you, if you are with me and hold up your right hand with the palm forward. That will mean you come as a friend, promising not to deliver him to a sheriff."

"And what do we say to him?"

"We ask him what made him think, one time, that Señor Cranston was unworthy to be a guest of his sister."

"When was that?"

"The first time Cranston called on Felicia, I chatted with them awhile, then left Felicia to entertain him in the *sala*. In a few minutes Ernesto came in and stared coldly at the guest. Felicia presented him to Cranston. Ernesto said to Felicia: 'I have mislaid my serape, sister. Could you find it for me?' She left the *sala* and in a little while came back with Ernesto's serape. Ernesto bowed and withdrew. And so, quite promptly, did Cranston. Señor Cranston, it seemed, was not feeling well. He went out to his horse and rode away."

A gleam came to Johnny's eyes. "You think Ernesto told Cranston to clear out."

"We did not think so then," Rivera said. "But looking back now, I remember that Cranston did not return to call on Felicia for many months. Not until Ernesto had killed a man with a knife, fighting in a cantina over a woman. He became a fugitive then, and promptly Cranston came to our house again. He has come many times since, hoping to marry Felicia."

Johnny could see daylight now. His own suggestions that Cranston might be a crook had brought to Rivera's mind the conduct of Ernesto that evening in the *sala*. If Ernesto had had reason to consider Cranston unworthy of his sister, he would have acted just so. His strain of Spanish culture would forbid him from making a row with a guest, and offending Felicia; but his fierce Indian eyes could have thrown a prodigious scare into Cranston.

"Very well," Johnny said. "So we meet Ernesto day after tomorrow, and ask him why."

"*Si*, Señor Johnny. *Pasado mañana*. In *el Canyon de los Muertos*."

It was agreed that Johnny should wait till after dark, tomorrow, before riding out to the Rivera rancho. He could arrive by midnight at the Bar L, rest a few hours, and at daybreak leave with Rivera for the canyon.

"We will speak of it to no one," the senator warned.

Johnny grinned. "It's a cinch I won't tell the Circle D's."

"I do not agree with you," Rivera protested, "about Rick Sherwood. Many years I have known him. Always I have

found him a *muy bueno* caballero. The guilt lies at Chico, all of it. Except perhaps Cranston is involved some way. Orme yes, Cranston perhaps, but not Sherwood."

"Have it your own way," Johnny said.

After Rivera left him Johnny went down to the hotel dining-room and had supper. As he emerged into the lobby the clerk handed him a note. Johnny opened it and saw a girl's handwriting:

Will you come to our house? Father and I must see you at once.

Flo Sawyer

Well, Johnny thought, *she owes me a date. I won that bet, didn't I?*

Then another idea wiped the smile from his face. It could be a trap. Maybe Flo hadn't written the note. He wasn't familiar with her writing.

There were lots of Jakie Kims on this range. One of them could frame a saloon woman to write this note and be waiting with a rifle near the Sawyer front yard.

Johnny spoke to the clerk. "Who delivered this note?"

"A Mexican boy. Never saw him before."

"Could he be a *mozo* of the Sawyers?"

"Mebbeso; mebbe not."

Not taking any chances, Johnny left the hotel by an alley exit and made a wide detour. When he approached the Sawyer house it was from the rear and by way of a plum orchard there. A kitchen window was lighted. Through it he saw Flo Sawyer.

If the message was a decoy, the decoyer would expect him to approach from the street. An ambusher would be lurking in the dark there with a cocked gun. Johnny moved quietly on through the orchard to the Sawyer kitchen door and knocked there.

Flo opened it. When she saw Johnny, the astonishment on her face was all the answer he needed. Clearly she wasn't expecting him.

"My father isn't home."

"When he comes back, give him this." Johnny handed her the message. "Some boy brought it to the hotel a little while ago."

She looked at the handwriting of a woman and grasped at once what it meant. Fright crossed her face and she drew Johnny into the kitchen, quickly closing the door. "I didn't write it," she said.

"That's what I figured. So I came in the back way. Just thought you ought to know. I'll be going now."

But she barred his way and locked the door. Then she pulled down the window shade. "They'll kill you," she said helplessly.

"They?"

"Orme's men, of course. The Chico gang. Men like Kim and Salvador who do anything Orme tells them."

"You wouldn't nominate Rick Sherwood, would you?"

"Of course not. Don't be stupid. I talked with Rick just after the hearing broke up. He explained everything."

She went into the front room, beckoning Johnny to follow. The parlor was unlighted and they stood at a window there. No life was in sight. But there were shrubs on the lawn, elms along the street, weeds and brush in a vacant lot across the way. Plenty of cover for a sniper.

"You must stay here," she said, "till Father comes home. He's at the courthouse."

Nothing could suit Johnny better.

Standing by her in the dark gave him a strange thrill.

"He explained about the mare and colt," she said, taking up where she'd left off. "He said that the old mare you brought in might have foaled the colt he sold Cranston. But he told me he'd never seen or heard of that mare before. Three years ago the roundup brought in a buckskin mare who'd obviously borne a colt, but the colt wasn't with her. They thought maybe wolves had killed it during the winter. But six months later they found a yearling colt, unbranded, running with Circle D horses. They gave credit to the buckskin mare and thought nothing more about it. This afternoon he admitted, like the fair generous man he is, that perhaps he'd been mistaken."

"Mighty big of him," Johnny said. She drew slightly away from him and he knew he'd used the wrong tone.

Her profile, in the dimness, was severe again. He noticed now that her nose and chin and forehead had classic lines, strong, intellectual, like the sculptured likeness of a Greek goddess.

Her gaze was still searching the street, the weeds and the brush beyond. Nothing could be seen or heard out there. To the left the street reared to a steep dead-end in the timber of a mountainside. And high above this loomed the horn at the end of Fisher's Mesa, like a giant saddle black against the moon.

To the right the winking lights of Las Perdidas. The Lost Ones! "Why do they call it that?" Johnny asked.

"More than two hundred years ago," she told him, "a band of Spanish explorers pushed this far north from Monterey, in Mexico, and made a settlement here. But a great flood came down the river and drowned most of them. So the survivors called the river *El Purgatoire.* We gringos can't pronounce that, so we call it the Picketwire. Las Perdidas has the same meaning. Place of the Lost Ones."

"I reckon I've sort of lost out," Johnny said abruptly.

At her quick, questioning look he added, "I mean you've had it in for me, Flo, right from the start. You made it plenty plain you don't want me around."

"It's the motive which brought you here," she said, not sternly, but gently. "Revenge. Revenge is ugly. Long ago someone did a great wrong to your people. So you dedicate your life to vengeance. It's not you I don't like, Johnny Diamond, but the drive back of you."

His lips formed a retort but he didn't speak it. For he knew she'd spoken the truth. He *had* come here to find and to kill three men.

"And that's why you stay here," Flo said. "To find and to kill."

Johnny said earnestly, "I got another reason to stay here now."

"What?" she asked him.

"You."

He said it simply and drew a quick response. She crossed to a lamp, lighted it, then lowered the window shade. Her face wore a high flush. "Sit down, Johnny Diamond."

He chose the divan, hoping she'd sit beside him. But she preferred a straight-backed chair well away from him.

"My father and I," she said, "have talked about you a good deal. He's a very wise man and he has taught me many things."

"What, for instance?"

"Character, he says, grows from the seed bed of motive. A crusade against

injustice is a good motive, if one concentrates on injustice suffered by others, and by society in general. If one broods on injustice to himself, he becomes narrow and mean and dangerous."

"You mean if I was all hopped up about somebody else's family bein' wiped out, 'stead of my own, it'd be all right?"

"It would be impersonal, in that case. There'd be no self-pity in it. And it could give a noble impulse, instead of one bristling with spite." A pleading came into her tone. "Think of it this way, Johnny Diamond. There've been millions of cruel injustices ever since the world began. Yours is only one. If you stuff your brain and heart with just that one, it warps you. You lose all perspective. You may suspect the wrong people and end up killing innocent men. My father said this to me one time: pity for others will make you wise; pity for yourself will make you stupid."

An odd thought came to Johnny. Ernesto Rivera! What would happen if he were to concentrate on that tragedy instead of his own? Would he think clearer? Could he look at the whole thing without personal prejudice, and thus without rancor?

Johnny didn't speak his thought. Yet something printed on his face made Flo look at him with a new interest. She laughed an apology.

"I must sound stupid myself, preaching to you." They heard footsteps on the walk outside. "That will be Father coming home."

Adam Sawyer opened the door and stepped into the parlor. He saw Johnny and grimaced dourly. "I thought we'd had enough of you, young man, for one day."

"So did I," Johnny grinned.

"This brought him here, Dad." Flo handed him the decoy message.

Reading it brought dark fury to the sheriff's face. He couldn't doubt that some cheap woman of the saloons, some pawn of Orme's, had written it and signed his daughter's name.

"I didn't want to get your porch post all shot fulla holes again," Johnny said, "so I came in the back way."

"Wait here." Adam Sawyer swept back the skirt of his long black coat and drew a forty-five. With it he stepped outside.

From a window they saw him cross the street and patrol the brushy lot over there. He returned and circled the house. When he came back in he sank wearily into a chair. "I'm willing to bet," he muttered, "that they posted a sniper out there. Just like that other time. But he's gone now. You better go home yourself, young man."

Flo insisted that Johnny leave by the orchard. She let him out the kitchen door and walked to the orchard gate with him.

"Where are you going now, Johnny?" Her face was anxious.

"To the hotel and to bed."

"I mean tomorrow?"

"I'll hang around town and rest up. Had to sleep out last night, chasin' that old mare."

"And day after tomorrow?"

Pasado mañana! He remembered Ronaldo Rivera's last word, and the tryst for day after tomorrow. At the Canyon of the Dead! But he'd promised the senator he wouldn't tell.

"Out on the range," Johnny said. He added shyly, "And I'll give you my word, Flo, I won't ride my own troubles. I'll put 'em aside and cogitate about somebody else's. Somebody I've

never even seen."

She smiled and said, "Good-by, Johnny."

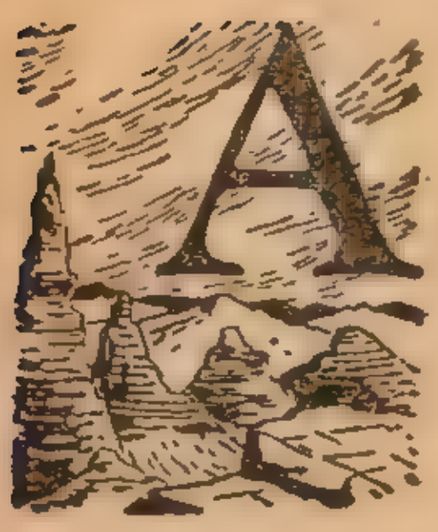
"'By, Flo." Somehow it sounded final, and perhaps forever, because both of them knew what waited for Johnny on the range. Killers waited there, and next time they might not miss.

Dread of it was printed clearly on Flo's face and it made Johnny bold. He took it gently between his hands and kissed her mouth.

Then he faded into the gloom of the orchard.

Chapter Twelve

The Canyon of the Dead



AFTER lunch next day Johnny went to the offices of the Picketwire *Roundup*. Editor Frank Sully was at his desk. "Anything new?" he asked.

"Not a thing," Johnny said. "Right now I'm lookin' up somethin' else. 'Bout 'leven months ago you had a knife killing in town. They say Ernesto Rivera and some guy quarreled over a woman. Could I see your file on it?"

Sully gave him a curious look, then nodded. He went into the file room and came back with an issue nearly a year old.

The item was on page one. Johnny read it. The affair had taken place in a dive called the *Buenos Noches* on Water Street. Ernesto had been drinking with one of the house girls, Winnie Quinn. About midnight a man named Eddie Falcon had joined them. In a quarrel over Winnie Quinn, Ernesto had stabbed Falcon through the heart. There was no evidence that Falcon had been armed. Ernesto had fled town and was wanted for the crime.

Nothing here, Johnny thought, which could help him any. But maybe he could get more details from the woman, Winnie Quinn.

"Does she still work at that joint?" he asked the editor.

"Couldn't say," Sully said. Then he smiled. "But I got a printer who's pretty much of a rounder. Wait and I'll ask him."

He went into the press room. Presently he reappeared. "Yeh, Winnie's still there. Not only that, but she owns the joint now. It's down by the tracks. Caters to switchmen and yard clerks."

Johnny left the office with an idea clicking. Winnie Quinn, a cheap gyp-joint steerer, had suddenly become prosperous.

Another thought jolted Johnny. If she owned a saloon, she'd need to apply for a license. Her signature would be on file.

Johnny hurried up to High Street and turned in at the courthouse. Johnny looked up the license clerk. "Did the *Buenos Noches* on Water Street," he inquired, "renew its license this year?"

"Must have," the clerk said. He stepped to a file and took from it a signed application. "Yeh," he reported. "Here it is. Winnie Quinn applied for a renewal and it was okayed. What's the matter?"

Johnny had snatched the application from his hand. "Let's show this to the sheriff, mister. He'll be interested."

The clerk followed him down the hall to the office of Adam Sawyer. The sheriff and Flo were both there. "It's the same handwriting," Johnny announced jubilantly. "Take a look."

He dropped the signed application on Sawyer's desk. The sheriff produced last night's decoy note and his eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"It's the same handwriting," he agreed. "Winnie Quinn, huh? Seems like she was mixed up in a case about a year ago."

"She was, Sheriff. The Ernesto Rivera case. I checked up on it in a news file."

Sawyer stared at him. "What made you do that?"

Johnny looked at Flo with a grin. "A tip from Flo. She told me to quit ridin' my own peeves and start thinkin' about other people's. So I picked on Ernesto. And look what I turned up!"

"You turned up," Sawyer conceded soberly, "the fact that the woman who decoyed you to a dark street last night is the same woman Ernesto and his victim were quarreling over, a year ago."

"That's the way it *looked*," Johnny said.

"That's the way it *was*," Sawyer corrected. "A dozen witnesses, several of them unimpeachable, saw the blow struck."

"Think it over," Johnny advised. "Winnie Quinn, hired as a decoy whenever they want a dangerous witness put out of the way. Maybe you'll get the same slant on it I have. If you do, maybe you'll drop that charge against Ernesto Rivera."

"If we only could!" exclaimed Flo. A wistful hope filled her eyes. It made Johnny remember that the fugitive was her foster cousin.

Adam Sawyer's fingers drummed on the desk. "Humph! A decoy used by Orme! We'll pick her up and give her the works."

"So long, folks." Johnny waved jauntily to Flo and left them. Given this lead, they could be depended on to follow through.

He went to his hotel and kept out of sight there until after dark. A moon was showing on the east horizon when he took a walk down to Water Street, beyond the Santa Fe tracks on the north side of the river. The *Buenos Noches* was easily found there, but Johnny did not go in. He reconnoitered for a look at the beer garden at the rear. The scene of Ernesto's crime. It was a hedge-bound plot with tables spotted among tubbed shrubs, dimly lighted by hanging lanterns. Painted women were drinking with male customers, mostly railroad men, coaxing them to a dance floor inside. One look was enough for Johnny.

Half an hour later he was at the livery barn tossing a saddle on Hackamore. He'd checked his gun here upon arriving in town. Now he belted it on. A carbine in the saddle scabbard and he made sure no one had tampered with it.

Cantering out of town he used High Street instead of East Main. Those who wanted him dead didn't know he'd be abroad tonight but there was no use taking chances. At the town limits he stopped to read a sign on a piñon tree. It was a copy of the local ordinance decreeing that all who entered must check their guns and not reclaim them until ready to ride out again.

Beyond that sign Johnny paralleled the road, keeping to the piñons, until he'd crossed the Frijoli hills and was down on the open flats. Here only a sparse growth of greasewood could provide ambush for a sniper. A full moon silhouetted Johnny. "They're layin' for us, Hackamore. The Circle

D's. Or Orme's gang. Or both."

A moving shadow in the sage made him snatch carbine from scabbard. But it was only a hungry coyote stalking a rabbit.

He detoured at the Frijoli Creek crossing and did the same at all other arroyos. On a low divide beyond he again kept to the piñons, well off the trail.

It was midnight when he reached the Rivera rancho; Felicia who admitted him. Her oval, olive face looked excited, and he sensed at once that the senator had told her where he was going. She ushered Johnny to the *sala.*

Don Ronaldo was there, booted and spurred, standing by the hearth. Gravely he exchanged greetings and then glanced at his daughter. "She is going with us, señor."

"And why shouldn't I?" the Spanish girl said in a tense tone. "He is my own brother."

Her father summoned Miguel, instructing him to feed Johnny's horse and to have the mount saddled again at dawn.

"You yourself must sleep a few hours, my friend."

"Not," Johnny said, "till I tell you some good news."

Felicia looked at him curiously. "About what, señor?"

"About Ernesto. The way I figure it, maybe he's not guilty. Listen and hear why." Johnny told them about the decoy message last night, written in the hand of Winnie Quinn.

"So she's an agent of the enemy. The same enemy had it in for Ernesto. Assuming Ernesto had something on Val Cranston." Johnny looked at Felicia and saw her flush crimson.

Since she was riding with them at dawn, her father must have told her why. The basic strategy of the excursion assumed that Ernesto had ordered Cranston from the house on the occasion of the man's first call here; and that Cranston, because of some guilt known to Ernesto, had been afraid to come back until after Ernesto's retreat to the hills.

"For a name," Johnny resumed, "call the enemy Orme. Once he sent a knifer named Salvador to kill me. My hunch is he sent a knifer named Eddie Falcon to kill Ernesto. The skit could go something like this: Winnie Quinn inveigles Ernesto into buying her a drink in a dim beer garden. Falcon slips up to stab Ernesto. But Ernesto's too quick. He has Indian eyes and ears. He dodges the blow and pulls a knife from his own boot. Fighting for his life, he kills Falcon. The other customers see the end of the fight, but not the beginning. Ernesto is with a woman, so they assume the two men quarreled over her. As they crowd up, Winnie gets rid of Falcon's knife. Which leaves the only one in sight Ernesto's."

"*Que terrible!*" gasped Felicia.

"Are you sure about this Quinn woman?" asked the senator.

"Only that they used her to decoy me," Johnny said. "But if they used her that way once, they'd do it twice. What's more, she collected a big chunk of money right after Ernesto's fight. Enough to buy the *Buenos Noches.*"

Don Ronaldo paced the *sala.* "We must see Ernesto," he muttered impatiently, "and ask what it is he knows about Cranston."

"The truth of it," Felicia said, "he

will tell to me. To the sister who loves him."

That was the consideration, Johnny presumed, which had made Rivera consent to take her along with them. Ernesto had always been devoted to her. She had more influence with him than anyone else. If only men approached him he might run away, or be hostile, or even fire his rifle as a warning to keep off. But his sullen suspicion would melt at sight of Felicia.

"We got nothing to go on," Johnny warned them, "except three things. The fake note yesterday proves Winnie's in with them. And Ernesto had something on Cranston. And Winnie collected a big fee for something."

"But Val Cranston," Felicia protested, "has always been so—so mild and well mannered. I can't imagine him killing anyone."

"He strikes me the same way," Johnny agreed. "So let's say he never killed anyone. Maybe he never did anything worse than petty theft or a forged check. Something small like that. But if it comes out it could uncover something big. Open a door to a lot of crookery higher up. So the higher up guys send a knifer to get Ernesto."

Don Ronaldo showed Johnny to a room and he soon fell asleep. It seemed scarcely a minute till Miguel awakened him. It was still dark outside. The senator and his daughter were waiting for him at a pre-dawn breakfast in the dining *sala*.

They were dressed for the saddle. Felicia in a trailing riding-skirt. Any town girl, and most ranch girls, would have worn pants. But not this maid of old Spain reared in the conservative culture of the Riveras.

A faint light tinted the east when they rode out through the gate, Miguel came back of them, leading a saddled horse.

"In case Ernesto is not mounted," Rivera explained.

Felicia added simply, "We shall bring him home with us, señor, if what you think is true."

"I believe it *is* true," murmured the senator. "So why should he hide like a renegade? If the sheriff says he must stand trial, I will bring in the greatest lawyers to defend him."

They crossed the Rio Seco wash and spurred on, faster now, and the top rim of the sun was showing when they forded McBride Creek. A few miles farther on Rivera left the road and led them obliquely across grama sod toward an upslope to Johnson's Mesa. Presently Johnny saw a deep gash in that slope, a narrow, rocky defile. "*El Canyon de los Muertos!*" Rivera announced.

Canyon of the Dead! Twenty-one years ago, this very day, a battle had been fought there. In the infancy of Ernesto. Would he, the single survivor of his race, again remember?

The imminence of it subdued Don Ronaldo, and Felicia, and even Johnny Diamond.

They came to the narrow entrance of the gorge and turned up it. Halfway up, they reined to an abrupt stop. "Ernesto! He is here!" exclaimed Rivera in an awed tone, and pointed.

Ahead of them, Johnny saw a column of gray smoke. It could only have one source. A fire of mourning which Ernesto built each year here. A salute to the spirits of his warrior forebears.

Don Ronaldo beckoned and they continued on. The gorge widened a little. For an acre of space its floor was

bare and on the bareness stood a monument of rocks. Atop of it a fire burned.

A saddled pony was tied near by. But they could see nothing of Ernesto.

"Perhaps," the senator whispered, "he heard us and is watching." He raised his right arm and held an open palm forward. Johnny did the same. But it was Felicia who spurred her horse ahead.

"Ernesto!" she called eagerly. "*Hermano mio.* It is I, Felicidad."

She loped straight to the rock monument and arrived there in advance of her father.

Then Johnny heard her scream. With Rivera he raced to her side and they all saw Ernesto.

The young Indian lay on his back, arms outflung, and he seemed to be dead. Blood which drenched his jacket was still fresh. "*Por Dios!*" cried Don Ronaldo. He dismounted to kneel by Ernesto. Felicia slid from her saddle and joined him there.

For the moment Johnny did not intrude. His eyes searched both ways along the gorge and to high shoulders on either side. It was cruelly clear, now, that someone else had known of Ernesto's ritual here each year.

Someone who, not more than an hour ago, had sent a bullet of death through Ernesto.

Then Felicia's pleading voice told Johnny that the Indian still had a breath of life. He dismounted, hat off, and stood gravely behind the kneeling father and sister.

A rifle bullet had passed completely through Ernesto, piercing a lung. A quick examination told them there wasn't even a faint chance for the man to survive. For an hour, at the most, he might linger on. Don Ronaldo held a flask to his lips. Felicia sat sobbing on the ground, Ernesto's head pillowed in her lap.

His eyes were open. He knew them. But when he tried to speak, blood from the pierced lung choked him. "Who did this thing, son of mine?" Rivera demanded bitterly in Spanish.

Ernesto could only shake his head. He did not know.

And Ronaldo Rivera, realizing he couldn't save a life, made a stern effort to save honor. He must prove here that Ernesto did not wear the guilt of murder.

"Attend closely, my son." Don Ronaldo spoke in rapid Spanish. "We believe you were not fighting over a woman. You were attacked by a hired assassin and you struck only to save your life. Is it true?"

Ernesto nodded a clear affirmative.

"Then why," Don Ronaldo asked softly, "did you run away?"

Ernesto answered only with a bitter look at his monument of rocks, and at the commemoration fire smoldering on it. The senator looked sadly up at Johnny Diamond.

"What he tries to tell us," he translated, "is that there is no justice for an Indian. He will not trust the laws of a race which destroyed his people."

And Ernesto confirmed it with a nod.

"We believe too," Don Ronaldo said to him, "that you knew evil in the past of one Val Cranston. You considered him unworthy to attend your sister. So you ordered him from our house."

Again an affirmative gesture from the dying man.

"Does this evil also concern one Rick Sherwood?"

This time Ernesto shook his head. A distinct negative. It was the same

when Rivera asked if the matter concerned Syd Orme.

"Do you know of any accomplice, other than Cranston himself?"

Again a negative from Ernesto.

"Who told you about this evil in the life of Cranston?"

Ernesto's lips moved. He was making a desperate effort. Those about him listened carefully and caught two faint phrases: *"Un estranjero—un comprador de lana—"*

That was all. A stranger—a buyer of wool! The effort exhausted Ernesto and Felicia, bending over him in tears, refused to permit any more questions. It would be futile in any case. In a very few minutes Ernesto would breathe his last.

Johnny remounted his horse. His eyes searched the gorge for the most likely spot from which the fatal shot could have been fired.

The walls were steep, the one on the south spotted here and there with clumps of scrub oak. Johnny spurred Hackamore up that steepness, looking for sign at each possible cover.

In a little while he found it. An empty shell from a .44 rifle. It lay in an oak thicket only a hundred yards from the fire built at dawn today by Ernesto Rivera. Beyond the thicket Johnny saw where a shod horse had been tethered. Plain tracks marked the sniper's retreat. They angled upward over a shoulder and disappeared in the general direction of San Ysidro.

Johnny picked up the empty shell and rode back.

"He is dead," Don Ronaldo reported to him bitterly.

Johnny showed him the empty shell. "This is what did it," he said grimly. "If you don't need me I'll see if I can follow his tracks."

He checked an impulse to mention the Circle D. If a Sherwood hand had done this, the man would probably ride straight home.

"We do not need you here, *amigo* Johnny. Miguel will help me take him to the rancho. He shall be buried with honor in the churchyard there."

"He told you nothing more?"

"*Nada mas*," murmured Ronaldo.

Chapter Thirteen

Saved—by the Enemy!

JOHNNY left them and rode upslope to where he'd found the rifle shell. He picked up the tracks of a shod horse and followed them over the gorge shoulder.

Beyond, the tracks veered directly north, toward the Picketwire valley. They led Johnny to bunch-grass flats below. The hoofprints were dim here, and Johnny missed many of them. But because they took a beeline now he could always pick them up again.

They crossed the road about halfway between San Ysidro and McBride Creek. Here the hoof marks were especially distinct and Johnny dismounted for a close scrutiny.

The shoe of the right hind hoof, he saw, had a protruding nail. It made a tiny hole in the sand about a quarter-inch deep. And where the tracks crossed McBride Creek, he picked up another item to identify the horse ahead.

McBride Creek was only a trickle here, and on its far bank the ground was boggy. The left foreleg of the fugitive's mount had sunk in to the knee. It was a bluish, gummy mud and only the left foreleg had sunk in that deep-

ly. The mud would cling to the hair, Johnny thought, until the animal was washed and curried.

The beeline of the trail continued on, northwesterly. Johnny followed it, generally not faster than a walk, so that it was well past noon when the tracks brought him to the Picketwire River. The fugitive had crossed here in shallow riffles. On the other side, the tracks turned upriver toward the town of Chico.

Orme! Everything seemed to lead straight to Orme.

Johnny followed on, with a late-afternoon sun in his eyes. Sand along the river bank made the tracks easy to read. The other man's horse had become tired at this point, and its pace had been a running walk.

The last words of Ernesto came back to Johnny. "*A stranger—a buyer of wool—*"

From such source had Ernesto learned about something shady in the past of Val Cranston. Something unconnected, according to the information, with either Sherwood or Orme. A wool buyer. . . .

Suddenly it clicked in Johnny's memory. The wife of the Chico bootblack, Frankie Valdez! She'd deserted Frankie to elope with a wool buyer. The fact had come out during the inquiry after Frankie's murder by an unknown knifeman, probably Diego Salvador.

Johnny summoned back what the Chico constable, Martinez, had told him about the runaway wife. She'd gone to Taos, it seemed, with a wool buyer who had there deserted her. Destitute, the woman had then sought a sordid livelihood on the Street of Suffering and Bitterness, in Las Vegas.

Johnny jogged on. Frankie could have known something about Val Cranston. He could have let it slip to his wife. She, later, could have passed it on to her lover, the wool buyer, who, after deserting her, might talk about it carelessly in his cups at some saloon or dance dive. And there young Ernesto Rivera, a frequenter of such dives, could hear it. A matter which wouldn't interest Ernesto at all, until one evening perhaps months later he found the man concerned, Val Cranston, paying court to his sister.

Bluntly Ernesto would tell Cranston he was unworthy of Felicia, ordering him to get out of the house and not come back.

The general pattern of it, in the light of Ernesto's last words, seemed at least probable.

The trail continued on up the river, past ragged patches of sunflowers, directly toward Chico. An irrigation ditch took off from the river and Johnny splashed through it, again worrying lest the same splashing had washed clean the left foreleg of the mount ahead. The sun had disappeared, now, back of the snowy sierra of the Culebras, fifty odd miles upriver.

It was hazy twilight when Johnny rode into the squalid streets of Chico plaza. On the main street a jaded black horse, with a .44 rifle in its saddle scabbard, caught his eye. It was tied in front of Sydney Orme's saloon.

The mount drew Johnny's attention because it resembled another he'd seen one time. On the road out of Perdidas when he and Flo Sawyer had withdrawn into piñons to let a rider pass. Jakie Kim had been riding a lean-flanked black much like this one.

Johnny dismounted by it. He looked closely at the left foreleg. A bluish, gummy mud clung to it, from hoof to

knee. Johnny picked up the animal's right hind leg and doubled it back, squatting in the pose a blacksmith takes when he shoes a horse. In the right hind shoe of this one he saw a loose nail.

This, beyond question, was the mount he'd followed from the Canyon of the Dead.

Kim's horse. The man had come here, Johnny guessed, to collect for a job of work. He wondered how much they paid Jakie for each sniping.

A peon was lounging on the walk. "You know Jakie Kim?" Johnny asked him.

The man nodded.

"Seen him lately?"

The peon jerked his head toward the latticed doors of Orme's place. Johnny pushed them open and stepped inside.

He saw five customers. Orme's bulk loomed back of the bar. Two customers were tossing dice at a rear table. Two others were sipping beer in a booth near the front. The fifth was Jakie Kim. Kim stood at mid bar, his back to it, his elbows hooked on it.

"Hello, Kim," Johnny said. "That black bronc out there. Is it yours?"

"Sure," Kim admitted. "What about it?"

"He's come a long way," Johnny said. "You'd ought to give him a rubdown and a feed, after a ride like that."

Kim stiffened. His right hand inched a little toward his gun butt. Back of him Johnny could see Orme eyeing him with an alert craftiness, both hands below bar level. The rattle of dice to the left stopped, as did a hum of talk from the pair sipping beer in a booth.

"After a ride like what?" Kim challenged, his gun hand cocked like a steel spring.

Johnny knew now that he shouldn't have come in here alone. If he accused Kim, he'd have to shoot his way out. And they were six to one.

He couldn't watch them all. If he took his eyes off of Kim, Kim could beat him to a draw. He knew that Kim alone wouldn't have stood up to him. The man's present defiance was like that of a coyote, ready to snap and slash only because of a pack back of him.

He himself was at a disadvantage because no authority to arrest Kim was vested in him. He had no official deputyship. These rats could kill him and then claim it was a personal fight between himself and Kim. They'd name Johnny the aggressor. And they'd swear Kim had been there all day, and so couldn't possibly have ridden to the Canyon of the Dead.

Maybe he could cow them by using a big name. A name to conjure with, on this range, was Senator Rivera.

"A ride like Don Ronaldo took this morning," Johnny said. "To a gorge in a flank of Johnson Mesa. I was with him. So was his daughter and a *mozo*."

If it frightened them, the effect was opposite to that which Johnny had hoped for. A beer bottle came flying from a booth. It caught the side of Johnny's head and unbalanced him. And gained the needed split second for Jakie Kim. Kim's gun came out roaring. Its bullet would have brained Johnny had the bottle blow not knocked him a little to one side. His head was still thumping from it and his draw was awkward. Through the smoke of Kim's first shot he saw the man aim deliberately for another.

A forty-five boomed and Johnny for a moment thought it was Kim's. A frozen look on the fat, hog-jowled face of Syd Orme, turned now toward swinging doors at the entrance, made

Johnny look that way himself.

A man had just entered and there was a smoking gun in his hand. At the same instant Johnny became aware that Jakie Kim was collapsing in a lump on the bar rail.

"Hands up, all of you!" the newcomer yelled. His gun covered the room. "That means you too, Orme."

Johnny blinked. He could hardly believe it. He looked at the man who'd saved his life. Rick Sherwood of the Circle D!

ORME, WHO'D BEEN ON THE POINT of pulling a shotgun from under the bar, now had his hairy hands ear-high. So did the four table customers. Johnny had his own gun out but there was no need for it.

Kim lay motionless on the floor. A red hole between the eyes meant that he'd never snipe again.

Sherwood spoke amiably, almost comradely, to Johnny Diamond. "What were they gunnin' you for, fella?"

"I tracked Kim here," Johnny explained, "from a canyon where he drygulched Ernesto Rivera."

Sherwood said sharply, "You know anything about it, Orme?"

Orme licked puffy lips. "Not a thing," he croaked. "Kim was just a customer here. Couldn't say where he's been today."

The four customers backed sullenly to a wall. Sherwood shot questions at them. None of them would admit having thrown the bottle.

"Like I said," Orme repeated with a sallow smile. "Kim come in alone and didn't say where he'd been. Then this Texas kid comes in and Kim goes on the prod. About what I didn't know. I was just grabbin' for a shotgun to stop a fight when you stopped it yerself. Thanks, fella."

He leaned forward and peered over the bar at the dead Kim.

"Call your constable," Sherwood directed, "and give him the dope on it. Maybe he can find out who tossed the bottle. Me, I'm reportin' straight to Sheriff Sawyer. Want to come along, Diamond?"

Johnny nodded and backed out to the front walk. Rick Sherwood followed him. "Thanks," Johnny said, "for saving my life."

The Circle D man shrugged. "Nothin' else I could do. Couldn't very well stand by and watch 'em fill you full of holes. Let's go."

His horse was tied by Johnny's. Dusk was graying the plaza as they rode out of it and forded the river. They turned up the south bank toward Las Perdidas.

"You say he drygulched Ernesto?" Sherwood brooded. "Howcome you to find out about it?"

Johnny told him about the dawn excursion with the Rivera family. But he omitted the dying Indian's testimony about a wool buyer. Neither did he make any mention of Cranston.

For Johnny still had his fingers crossed about Sherwood. Everything till now had suggested treacherous collusion between Cranston and the Circle D. Could Sherwood have intervened at Orme's bar just for the effect on Adam and Flo Sawyer? He was a persistent suitor of Flo's. Johnny's intimations had put him under a cloud. Wouldn't he now regain all lost ground, and more? Who could accuse Sherwood now of being in with the

Orme ring? As for Jakie Kim, the ring would now look on him as a worn-out tool. Getting rid of Kim would be an asset rather than a loss. Also it would save the men higher up from paying a fee for the murder of Ernesto.

Kim had failed twice to ambush Johnny Diamond; and while he'd succeeded in the case of Ernesto he'd been tracked from the crime straight to Orme's bar. Had he murdered Johnny there he most certainly would have compromised others than himself. To save his neck Kim might even have turned state's evidence, implicating those who'd hired his guns.

Johnny glanced sidewise at the tall, personable rancher at his stirrup. Sherwood looked relaxed and anything but hostile. The soft night light made his profile seem plausible, cleancut, frank. It was hard to believe he could have been involved with the likes of Orme and Kim and Diego Salvador. Harder still to believe that, six years ago, he could have been one of three Texas raiders.

"I owe you apologies," Sherwood said suddenly, "on two counts."

"Meaning which?" Johnny prompted.

"About Kim showing up at my ranch that night. I said he wasn't there. One of Perry's men said he was. Today I found out I'd been wrong."

"So Kim *was* there, after all?"

"That's right. I got a big outfit, Johnny. Some of 'em are hard eggs. I let Alf Sansone hire a few like that to give us a little more fire power against rustlers. One of these gunnies was a gink named Ferd Smith. Turns out now Smith used to run around with Kim, back in Kansas. They had some unfinished business. No tellin' what it was. Maybe on the shady side, because when Kim rode out to see Smith about it Smith kept him out of sight from the rest of us. Today I found out about it and I tied a can onto Ferd Smith."

Pretty neat, Johnny thought. Digging up a scapegoat like that. Still, it might be true. "Howcome you happened by Chico," Johnny asked, "just in time to walk in on a gunfight?"

Again Sherwood grimaced. "Soon as I found out about Ferd Smith, I headed upriver to see Adam Sawyer. Nothing else I could do. I'd told Sawyer Kim wasn't there. Knowin' now that he was, only thing I can do is ride in and admit it to the sheriff. Got as far as Chico and stopped for a drink. And there I found Kim gunning you at a bar."

Conveniently coincidental, Johnny thought. Sherwood might have had an appointment with Kim there. A payoff appointment!

"You mentioned *two* counts," Johnny prompted.

"That old mousey mare you rounded up. I got to thinkin'. She sure does look like a colt I sold Cranston. For forty bucks. Maybe that old mare foaled the colt and maybe not. We'll never know. Not worth arguing about, I say. So that's another reason I rode to town. To find you and hand you the price of the colt." Sherwood took forty dollars from his wallet and offered it to Johnny.

Johnny hesitated a moment, then accepted the money. To refuse it would mean an admission that he himself doubted the colt's origin. What baffled him now was the neat way in which Sherwood had made himself look generous, warm, punctiliously honest. All of which would score big with Flo Sawyer.

They rode into East Main and, turn-

ing to the left on Commercial, Johnny stopped at Grinstead's livery barn. Hackamore had traveled an eighty-mile circle and needed his oats.

Sherwood continued on toward the Sawyer cottage. It was half an hour later when Johnny. himself arrived there on foot.

Flo admitted him. Her face had shock on it, which meant that Sherwood had already relayed the report about Ernesto. Adam Sawyer, chewing an unlighted stogie, was pacing the floor. Sherwood, looking relaxed and handsome, sat with a glass of wine in hand.

"Rick," Flo said quietly, "has told us everything."

Not everything, Johnny wanted to say, but didn't. Sherwood couldn't have relayed Ernesto's tip about a wool buyer. And Johnny decided to say nothing about it himself. Senator Rivera would, presumably, when he reported to his brother-in-law tomorrow.

"He sure showed up just in time," Johnny admitted with a dry smile. "That Kim guy was just about to burn me with a slug."

Mild rebuke was in the look Flo gave him. It said quite eloquently, *Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Johnny Diamond! Imagining all those wild things about Rick! And now he saved your life!*

Sherwood had even told them about Kim's secret tryst with Ferd Smith at the Circle D, and about his surrender in the mare-and-colt controversy. Johnny could see it had put him on a pedestal with Flo.

The sheriff was still pacing. "I can't understand," he muttered, "why anyone would want to kill Ernesto."

Johnny could have told him. But if he brought Cranston's name into it, and if Cranston was involved with Sherwood, Sherwood would warn the man. They might even send someone to deal with the wool buyer mentioned by Ernesto. Johnny must get to the wool buyer first.

"Did you pick up Winnie Quinn?" Johnny asked. He watched sharply and it seemed to him that Sherwood stiffened a little.

Sawyer nodded. "I've got her in jail. But she's buttoned her lip. Won't give out a thing. All I can charge her with is a minor forgery. Signing Flo's name to a message."

"What message?" Sherwood asked. His tone seemed uneasy although no one noticed it but Johnny.

Flo herself explained to Sherwood about the decoy message. "Ernesto was involved with her, remember? It must have something to do with what happened today. It's all so horrible—poor Ernesto!"

Her face clouded. She and Felicia and Ernesto had been children together.

An idea came to Johnny. About Winnie Quinn. But it would need thinking about. And it was something he didn't want to mention in front of Sherwood.

Sherwood, with Flo seated loyally by him on the sofa, was riding high now. The girl's manner toward him seemed almost repentantly tender. As though Johnny's accusations had implanted some vague doubts of which she was now ashamed.

"What happened today," Adam Sawyer said with a snap of conviction, "proves I was right all along. All the dirty tracks lead to Orme. Orme and his crew of drygulching thugs. He's been too slippery for me. But in the end I'll nail him."

Johnny's cue was to agree. He should admit he'd been wrong about Sher-

wood. When he didn't, his silence drew another mute rebuke from Flo. From then on she cooled toward Johnny and warmed toward Sherwood. Johnny thought of night before last, when he'd kissed her lips at the orchard gate. Maybe she remembered it too, and resented him all the more for it. *She thinks I'm an ungrateful wretch. She thinks I ought to be humble and beg Sherwood's pardon, and eat everything I ever said about him. But I won't. Because I still think it's true.*

He'd arrived with the idea of winning a sit-out race with Sherwood. Of outstaying the man, and then having Flo all to himself. He could see now it wouldn't work. The Circle D man wore the halo tonight, and was far more welcome here than Johnny.

"I guess I'll be ambling," Johnny said.

Adam Sawyer went to the door with him. Flo said good-by without rising.

Chapter Fourteen

Bones in a Shallow Grave

WHEN the six a.m. train left next morning, Johnny was on it. He had a round-trip ticket to Las Vegas. It was noon when he got off at that city.

A Mexican porter was wrangling baggage on the depot platform. "Where," Johnny asked him, "can I find *La Calle de la Amargura?*"

"It is a street in Old Town." The porter gave explicit directions.

Johnny took a hack which conveyed him across the Gallinas River to the more disreputable part of town. He paid his fare and got out.

He was on a street of uneven board walks and buzzing flies. The only shop there had a sign which announced: TIENDA BARRATA. The rest were dice joints, saloons, and bawdy houses. Painted sirens peered from the windows. The cheapness of it depressed Johnny. And yet by startling contrast an ancient adobe church stood at the far end of the street, as though looking sadly down it; and the name on it was *The Church of Our Lady of Sorrows.*

Johnny covered the bars first. Did anyone know where he could find a widow named Valdez?

It was a common name, they told him. Many Valdezes lived in Las Vegas. After canvassing the last joint he was ready to give up. Then he saw a white-haired priest emerge from an old church. Johnny went to him and told everything he knew about the widow of Frankie Valdez.

"Recently a woman came here in grief," the priest said. "She had a newspaper in hand. It said her husband had been killed by a knife in Chico."

"That's the one."

"If you mean her no harm, my son, I will tell you where she is."

"All I want," Johnny assured him, "is information."

"She works not in the houses of ill fame," the priest said, "but for them. She bends over tubs, washing their linens. There." He pointed to a mud jacal facing an alley.

It was there, in squalid poverty, that Johnny found Dolores Valdez. Her face was thin and lined and her eyes were black-circled.

"My only errand," Johnny said gently, "is to find and punish the men who killed your husband."

He took a chance that she'd want that. If she felt remorse for deserting Frankie, she'd sympathize with an ef-

fort to convict his murderers.

She gave only a dumb stare and Johnny realized she spoke no English. He repeated his statement in Spanish.

Promptly she responded in the same tongue. "You knew my Frankie?"

Johnny nodded. "Mine were the last boots he ever shined."

She dropped her scrub brush and led the way into the hut. It had a clean swept floor and little else. There she faced Johnny and said, "How may I help you, señor?"

It didn't take long then. "After the wool buyer left you," Johnny said, "he went to a cantina and had drinks. It loosened his tongue and he talked about a Señor Val Cranston. It was a matter, perhaps, that he learned from you, you having learned it from Frankie."

"All my husband ever said about Señor Cranston," she remembered, "concerned his cheating at the scales in Denver."

Johnny drew her out, bit by bit. Cranston, prior to three years ago, had been employed as weigher by a livestock commission company at Denver. Incoming cattle were weighed in pen lots. Cranston had made a practice of overweighing certain pen lots. The favored sellers got bigger checks than they deserved. The overcharge was split with Cranston. The stockyards people had established a double check on the weighings, and put an end to Cranston's petty graft. Resigning his job, he'd later been appointed brand inspector for Las Perdidas County.

"Was Rick Sherwood one of the favored shippers?"

The woman didn't know.

"Is that all Frankie ever told you about Cranston?"

"That is all, señor."

"Did he ever tell you anything crooked about Syd Orme of Chico?"

"No, señor. Long ago, when we were first married, he worked as porter at Orme's bar. But he tells me nothing of what goes on there."

"You never heard him mention anything mysterious? Something hush-hush, I mean, in the doin's at Chico?"

"I can think of nothing, señor."

"Thanks," Johnny said. He took a ten-dollar bill from his wallet. "Buy yourself a dress, señora."

She smiled gratefully. "You are kind, señor."

He went out and started up the alley. Before he'd taken a dozen steps she caught up with him. "I have just remembered one small thing, señor."

"What?" Johnny prompted.

"One time at Chico—four, five, maybe six years ago—I take my tubs to the shade of a cottonwood to wash clothes there. It is near the headgate of the *acequia* where it leaves the river. I am working there when my husband comes to me. He makes me move my tubs to another place. I ask him why and he says it is *mal suerte* to be under that alamo by the *acequia*. He says a dead man is buried there."

"What dead man?"

"I do not know, señor. Only that much Frankie has said to me."

Johnny took a cab back to New Town and at sunset boarded a Colorado-bound train. In the smoker he rolled a cigarette. He propped his legs, clad in their Linked Diamonds boots, on the opposite seat.

His mind digested the information gleaned from Dolores Valdez. It certified to the crookery of Val Cranston. Still, Johnny felt disappointed. The woman had told him nothing which involved Sherwood or Orme.

A grave under a cottonwood could hardly excite him. Many men, in years past, must have died with their boots on at Chico. Makeshift graves would be the rule rather than the exception. An ignorant peon like Frankie Valdez wouldn't want his wife to stand all day over the bones of a dead man.

The vital matter, Johnny thought, was not Cranston's crookery but the nature of it. The overweighing of cattle to split a gain therefrom with a shipper. It involved collusion with a dishonest cowman . . . exactly the same type of guile which had later been used systematically, according to Johnny's theory, in the false checking of brands at Thacker. All in all it bolstered that theory. The appointment of Cranston as brand inspector, made through Senator Rivera at Sherwood's request, seemed to fill out a pattern. A double check at the stock yards scales having stopped one form of thievery, Sherwood and Cranston had figured out another one. This time by shipments east from Thacker.

Should he discuss this with Sawyer? Johnny decided he wouldn't. At least not till he could tie a few threads. With Adam and Flo Sawyer, Sherwood was the fair-haired boy right now. Hadn't the man just waded into a gunfight to save Johnny's life at Chico?

A grimness shaded Johnny's lips as he tipped his hatbrim over his eyes, to shut out the smoker lights, and went to sleep.

The jolting of a pusher engine, being coupled on at Willow Springs, awakened him. He napped briefly again as the train toiled up Wootten Pass. Then a swifter hum from the fishplates as it coasted down into Las Perdidas.

It was after midnight when Johnny got off at Las Perdidas. At his hotel room he slept late. A headline caught his eye as he passed through the lobby on the way to breakfast. Johnny bought a copy of the Picketwire *Roundup* and read it over his scrambled eggs and coffee.

The front page carried three stories. One announced the fatal sniping of Ernesto Rivera in the Canyon of the Dead.

The second story told about Johnny Diamond tracking the sniper to Chico where Johnny would have been shot dead by the murderer except for the timely intervention of "a prominent stockman of the lower Sunflower Valley, Rick Sherwood of the Circle D." The story presented Sherwood in a heroic role.

In the light of recent insinuations against Sherwood, the account said, *the incident must surely heap coals of fire on the head of our well-meaning young friend from Texas.*

Johnny grinned as his eyes shifted to the third sensation. CRANSTON DECAMPS, the lead line said. *On demand of Senator Ronaldo Rivera, Sheriff Sawyer called yesterday to question Cranston at his quarters on Park Avenue, only to find that Cranston had left hastily for parts unknown. An exhaustive search has failed to uncover Cranston. His horse being at the livery barn, it is assumed he went away by train. He did not appear at Huerfano last night, where he was due to inspect brands on a shipment of cattle.*

The paper said that both the senator and the sheriff had been interviewed and had given out every known fact.

"Here you are, young man." The intruding voice was Frank Sully's. The editor sat down opposite Johnny. "I see you've read my latest scoops," he grinned. "I got 'em straight, didn't I?"

"Straight as a string," Johnny agreed.

"Anything to add?" Sully whipped out a notebook.

"I got an idea or two," Johnny admitted, "but I'd rather save 'em for the sheriff. If he wants to pass 'em on, it's okay with me."

"You can't see him today," Sully told him. "He and his daughter went out to the Bar L for Ernesto's funeral."

"I might find a deputy or two at Sawyer's office."

"Not today," Sully corrected. "All deputies are out beating the bushes for Cranston. I suppose you'll drop your feud with the Circle D, now that Sherwood went to bat for you at Chico?"

"He's been right friendly lately," Johnny evaded.

He went outside and strolled to the corner of Main and Commercial. A buckboard rolled in along East Main. The driver was Chuck Wiggins. Chuck hitched his team and Johnny crossed to join him.

"Hi," Chuck greeted with a grin. "You sure stirred things up around here, fella. Let's hoist a couple."

They went into a saloon and took drinks to a booth.

"I see where Cranston flew the coop," Chuck said. "You sure had that guy tagged right, Johnny."

Johnny looked speculatively at his friend. "I'm goin' to sound you out, Chuck, to see if you think a hunch of mine makes sense."

Chuck leaned forward, all ears. "Shoot, pal."

"My hunch is that Syd Orme's a silent partner in the Circle D."

The redhead stared. "Could be," he admitted. "Sherwood started six years ago with nothin' but a dugout in a sand bank. Then right sudden he gets to be a big cowman. Someone backed him. Shoot again, pal."

"Kim was a tool of the Orme-Sherwood ring. A worn-out tool they couldn't use any more, after he'd let himself get tracked from Ernesto's murder. So they knocked him off, making it look like a heroic rescue of yours truly. *Tambien* it saved payin' his fee."

Wiggins gulped on that one, but said, "Keep shootin', pal."

"The ring had another worn-out tool. Cranston. The Thacker shipping racket was washed up, the minute I even suggested it. So Cranston became a liability. So why wouldn't they polish him off just like they did Kim?"

Chuck whistled softly. "You figger Cranston didn't run! They just plugged him and dumped him in the river!"

"It makes sense," Johnny insisted. "Nothing else does. A whisper from a dying Indian wasn't enough to make Cranston run."

"I'd buy it in a minute, Johnny, if I thought Orme's a silent partner in the Circle D."

"If you can turn up anything on that, Chuck, let me know. I got another angle to work on."

"I sure will," Wiggins promised. He had Lazy M errands in town and went out to get busy on them. Johnny sauntered to the hotel.

He was waiting in the sheriff's office, a morning later, when Adam Sawyer came in. The sheriff listened impassively as Johnny told about his interview with Dolores Valdez at Las Vegas.

"Cranston!" he muttered. "So you were right about him, young man. Overweighing cattle at the Denver yards, huh? Still, I can't see why he'd be scared enough to run. The fraud was more than three years old. And

with only hearsay gossip to back it up." Sawyer brooded over it. "You'd think he'd stand pat. 'Stead of that, he had a hearsay witness knocked off and then ran away himself."

"I doubt," Johnny offered, "that it happened that way."

"What do you mean?"

He'd run into a stone wall of prejudice, Johnny thought, if he mentioned Rick Sherwood.

"I think Cranston was small potatoes, Sheriff. Like Winnie Quinn. By the way, you still got her locked up?"

"Yeh, and she's screaming to get out. Only thing I can charge her with is signing Flo's name to a message. I'll just hold her a few days and then let her go."

"Let's give her something to read," Johnny said. He brought from his pocket yesterday's copy of the local paper. "Mind sendin' this to her cell, Sheriff?"

Sawyer gave a puzzled stare. "What for?"

"Just let her read it," Johnny urged, "and see what happens."

Sawyer called in a deputy and gave him the newspaper. "Take it to the Quinn woman," he directed. He turned back to Johnny. "What about this body? The one you say's buried by an *acequia* at Chico."

"I didn't say it's there. I said Frankie Valdez told his wife it's there."

"When did he tell her about it?"

Johnny thought back. "Four—five—six years ago, she said."

Six years! The term of time might be significant! Johnny himself had come to this range on the trail of a crime six years old. True that crime had occurred in Texas and this was Colorado. Yet somehow the information he'd gleaned from Dolores Valdez seemed now more important. He got to his feet.

"Let's go dig it up, Sheriff!"

Calling in a deputy, Sawyer ordered horses. An hour later Johnny was riding down the Picketwire toward Chico. Sawyer rode stiffly at his left, the deputy at his right.

"You gave Winnie Quinn that paper?" Johnny asked.

The deputy nodded. "She seemed right interested."

At Chico they looked up Constable Martinez. Martinez rounded up some digging tools and they went to the headgate of an irrigation ditch which diverged from the river just below town.

A single cottonwood grew near the headgate. "The Valdez woman," Johnny reminded them, "said it's under that tree."

They dismounted and Martinez passed out shovels. Johnny chunked his shovel blade into the ground at a dozen spots. The others did the same, each man taking a side of the tree. It was Pedro Martinez who struck a looseness of soil which, he was sure, meant that it had once been turned over. Adam Sawyer joined the constable there and the two began spading out earth.

"He's right," Sawyer agreed. "It's an old refilled hole."

Two feet down they found a human skull. Johnny and the deputy took a turn at the digging. The ribs of a skeleton, with strands of rotted leather hanging to the bones, came into view.

"Nothing we can make of it, though," Sawyer growled. "No way to tell who the man was, or how he died."

Two things were certain. The man had been buried coffinless and fully dressed. He'd been interred hastily too, Johnny thought, else the grave would have been deeper.

Then he saw the boots. Or what remained of them, which were matched and mildewed shells of what had once been fine Morocco leather. Johnny dropped to his knees for a close look.

A sense of awe, then, left him dumb. A faint design was still readable around the valanced top of each boot. Linked Diamonds!

These were the boots which had been stripped from the feet of his murdered father, six years ago in Texas!

Chapter Fifteen

Air-Conditioned Sombrero

THERE could be no doubt. Even Adam Sawyer, comparing the boots with those worn by Johnny now, agreed solemnly.

"What do you make of it?" he muttered.

"My guess," Johnny said, "is that the three raiders came here to Chico where, maybe in a quarrel over the loot, two of 'em killed the third. So they planted him with his boots on under the nearest tree."

"And mine is," Sawyer brooded, "that only one of them came here and took the losing end of a gunfight. Some local hoodlum did it."

"It wasn't Shotgun Orme who did it." Johnny pointed out a single bullet hole in the skull. "He wasn't killed with a shotgun."

Sawyer made notes. "Cover him up, Pedro," he instructed the constable. "I'll turn in a report to the D.A. and ask if he wants to follow through on it."

He stepped into his saddle and rode dourly to Orme's saloon. Johnny was waiting on the walk there when Sawyer came out.

"Orme," he reported, "claims he doesn't know a thing about it."

Johnny, as they rode back toward Las Perdidas, knew a feeling of excited vindication. He'd come here looking for an old mare and a pair of boots. He was wasting his time, people had told him. But now he'd found both the mare and the boots.

"One down, Sheriff, and two to go."

"You mean," Sawyer challenged, "you think two of those old Texas raiders are still on this range?"

"That's my hunch, Sheriff."

"They're not Orme and Cranston," Sawyer said with assurance. "Orme started that Chico saloon eight years ago and he's never left it for more'n a day or two at a time. And I've checked on Cranston. Six years ago he was a weighmaster at Denver and he kept right on that job till he came here as brand inspector."

At the courthouse they found Flo waiting in her father's office. She was busily transcribing reports from various deputies who were out looking for Cranston. Johnny felt his pulse quicken when she looked up to smile at him. She wore a tailored blue suit with starched white cuffs. Her dark hair, usually drawn severely back on either

side, was fluffed out today in a wavy, crinkly effect which won Johnny's instant approval.

"I've just heard," she said, "that you went to Las Vegas."

"Give her a complete report on it," Adam said. "And Flo, you'd better take notes for the record."

"First," Johnny said, "I got another idea. Yesterday Winnie Quinn was screamin' to be turned loose."

The sheriff looked askance at him. "That's right. So what?"

Johnny twisted a cigarette thoughtfully. "Why don't you go to her cell right now? Ask her if she still wants to get out?"

"Of course she does. Just what are you getting at, young man?"

"Why don't you humor me," Johnny wheedled, "and see if Winnie's changed her mind?"

Sawyer gave a shrug of tolerance. Abruptly he left the office, heading down a corridor toward the county jail.

Johnny turned back to Flo, launching into an account of his interview with Dolores Valdez. When he went on to tell about the find today at Chico, sympathy on Flo's face changed to shock.

"How horrible! And yet how perfectly amazing that you'd find those old boots!"

Johnny smiled somberly. "Funny how things work out, Flo. Two other people had grief as bad or worse than mine. Ernesto Rivera and Dolores Valdez. I begin chasing their troubles, and first thing you know I begin to see daylight on my own."

"It's always that way," Flo said warmly. "I'm so glad you—" The return of Adam Sawyer interrupted her. The sheriff had a baffled look.

"I can't understand it," he muttered.

"You saw Winnie Quinn?" Johnny prompted.

He nodded. "Yesterday she was yelling her head off to be turned loose. Now she wants to stay right there in her cell."

"She's had time," Johnny suggested, "to read the paper we gave her."

"What," Sawyer demanded, "could *that* have to do with it?"

"She was a stooge," Johnny reminded him, "of the boss crook, whoever he is. Mr. Big had two other stooges. Jakie Kim and Val Cranston. The paper says Kim got shot and Cranston disappeared."

The sheriff's mouth fell open. He gave a long penetrating stare.

"You mean you think Winnie figures she'll be killed if—"

"If she's anywhere but safe in a cell," Johnny supplied. "And why not? Mr. Big used her at least twice, once to decoy Ernesto and once to decoy me. So he wouldn't dare use her again. After reading the paper, she knows what happened to Kim. And her guess about Cranston could be the same as mine. Which is that Cranston didn't do a run-out; he's full of slugs and buried somewhere."

Johnny looked at Flo. In the last half minute her manner toward him had changed. It was stiff and distant again. Only a little while ago he'd felt close to her. Now she seemed a million miles away.

"That," Flo said coldly, "would make sense if Orme had shot Kim. But he didn't. It was Rick Sherwood. He did it to save your life, remember?"

Why, Johnny wondered, couldn't he keep his mouth shut?

Flo got up and put on her street coat. "Rick happens to be in town,

Dad. He'll be stopping by to take me to lunch, any minute now."

She's layin' it on thick, Johnny thought. *I'm knee-high to a duck and the other guy's ten feet tall.*

A clink of spurs came down the hall. Then Rick Sherwood breezed in. "Ready, Flo?" He saw Johnny and for half a second he stiffened a little. Then he nodded amiably. "Hello, Diamond. Haven't seen you around lately. Anything new in the wind?"

"Nothing much," Johnny said. "What's cookin' at the Circle D?"

"Hard work and plenty of it. Don't need a job punching cows, do you?"

It was a bold stroke, and Johnny could see that it scored with Flo. The man who had every reason to resent him had first saved his life and now was offering him a job.

You see? Flo didn't say it but she looked it.

Johnny managed a laugh. "You wouldn't want a corpse on your hands, would you, Sherwood? That's what I'd be, about ten seconds after I showed up at the Circle D. I've got Alf Sansone's word for it. He said there's a Circle D slug waitin' for me on every trail in the county."

Sherwood shrugged. "Look, fella. Alf had a chip on his shoulder, sure. You implied the Circle D'd been stealing cattle and Alf naturally went on the prod about it. But I had a talk with the boys and toned 'em down."

Butter, Johnny thought, *wouldn't melt in his mouth.* The exasperating thing was that his line was going over big with Flo.

"Ride out to the Circle D any time you want to," Sherwood resumed, pouring it on, "and I'll personally guarantee not a single hand'll be raised against you. Ready, Flo?"

She turned for a last look at Johnny. This time her eyes said, *Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Johnny Diamond?*

She took Sherwood's arm and they disappeared down the corridor.

Johnny turned with a grimace to her father. "How much would you bet on my chances, Sheriff?"

Sawyer answered him gravely. "Not a plugged nickel, young man."

Strolling down East Main a few minutes later, Johnny saw a dust-covered buckboard whirl by. It turned north on Commercial toward the Santa Fe depot. Miguel of the Bar L was driving, with Senator Rivera on the seat by him. A northbound train was due. Presumably the senator was returning to the legislature at Denver.

Johnny walked briskly down Commercial, crossed the river bridge there, and found Rivera on the station platform.

Since the train might come at any minute, Johnny cut the greetings short.

"Somethin' you ought to know, Senator." Johnny gave a terse account of his excursion to Las Vegas, describing just how and where he'd found Dolores Valdez, and what he'd learned from her.

"La pobrecita!" murmured Don Ronaldo. He clapped his hands sharply and summoned Miguel. He thrust money into Miguel's hands. "Miguel, take the first train to Las Vegas. You will find the widow of Frankie Valdez in an alley back of *La Calle de la Amargura.* You will bring her back with you on the train. You will drive her out to our hacienda and install her as a maid there. *La pobrecita!"*

That was all. Miguel understood and would be delighted to obey. A thousand other *pobres* would hear about it and murmur, *"Que bondad! Que caballero*

simpatico, el senador!"

What kindness! What a sympathetic gentleman, the senator! "We must vote for him again, *primo*."

There had been no hypocrisy about it, yet never in his life would Ronaldo Rivera need to worry about re-election.

The senator took a train north and Miguel, after putting up his team at Grinstead's livery barn, took one south. Johnny sauntered restlessly back to his hotel.

He decided to keep out of Flo's way for a few days. Maybe her father would turn up the bullet-riddled body of Val Cranston. Something like that might take Flo down a peg or two.

The evening paper gave him a new item about Winnie Quinn. She'd called a real-estate agent to her cell and had commissioned him to dispose of the *Buenos Noches* for whatever cash she could get.

When she got the cash, Johnny concluded, she'd accept her freedom and leave town on the first train.

Again Johnny slept late and it was midmorning when he went down to breakfast. Later he picked up a timetable. The first train on which Miguel could arrive back from Las Vegas was due at noon.

At noontime Johnny strolled down to the depot. Presently a California-to-Chicago train pulled in.

The old *mozo* Miguel came up the platform shepherding Dolores Valdez. Her dark Latin eyes had a moistness and on her face was awe, wonder, gratitude. To be a maid at the great Rivera hacienda!

"Hi," Johnny greeted. The woman, he noticed, had a new black skirt and a matching mantilla over her head.

"How can I thank you, señor?" She said it in soft Spanish with something like worship in her eyes.

Johnny shrugged. "Don't thank me. Thank the senator."

"But it was you, señor, who found me. But for you he would not have known I was there."

"You folks had anything to eat?" Johnny asked.

When Miguel murmured a negative, Johnny herded them into the depot's restaurant. He sat down with them at a table there.

Again Dolores Valdez could hardly believe it. To be taken from a brothel alley and transported to the house of the great Senator Rivera! To be met by this handsome young gringo who sat at a table with her, treating her like an equal! Nothing would ever shake Dolores Valdez from a feeling of adoring gratitude for Johnny Diamond. Had he not given her the money to buy this beautiful new skirt and mantilla?

Johnny made them order the full-course dinner. He wanted only pie and coffee. An item on the menu caught his eye. "Yum!" he said to the waitress. "Just bring me a slab of that wild-currant pie and some coffee."

Presently the waitress reappeared with the first course for Miguel and Dolores. To Johnny, she said, "Sorry, mister. We're all out o' wild currant. Nothing left but raisin."

Johnny looked disappointed. "Skip it, then. Just some coffee."

It was of no importance, yet the widow of Frankie Valdez took it as a major tragedy. "*Que lastima!*" she murmured. "Someday, señor," she added shyly, "I would like to make for you a pie of the wild currants. I know a place where they grow. When we were young, Frankie and I went there often on the feast days, to gather the goose-

berries and the capulins and the wild currants."

Johnny sat chatting with them all through the dinner. Then he paid the check and left them, heading back toward his hotel.

The grateful voice of Dolores floated after him: "*Vaya con Dios, señor.*"

Editor Frank Sully was waiting for him in the Toltec lobby. He had a fat notebook and a poised pencil.

"We're doing a feature," he announced, "on those old boots you and the sheriff dug up at Chico. Just like the ones you got on now. What about 'em?"

"They were stolen from the feet of my father," Johnny said, "by the man who murdered him."

"Fill in a few details, won't you?"

Johnny was reluctant. Yet if he held anything back, this man would print a hodge-podge of guesses. Better to get the thing as near straight as possible.

"We had a ranch near Lampasas. I was fourteen and away at school. I came home and found my father and brothers dead, the house burned, and the stock driven off. Dad's wallet was gone. So were his boots."

Sully nodded. "I already picked up that much. Seems one of the killers had a sadistic sense of humor. He put what he thought were pennies on your father's eyes. You threw 'em away and found 'em six years later. One was a penny and the other was a beer check on a Colorado saloon. Tracks indicated three raiders. What do you figure they did with the loot?"

"I'd have to guess," Johnny said. "Chances are they sold the stock to some trail herd bound for Kansas. All but one old brood mare that wasn't easy to sell. Maybe that's why one of 'em put on Dad's Linked Diamonds boots. The stock was branded Linked Diamonds. So it made whoever wore the boots look convincing as the owner of the stock."

The editor's eyes gleamed shrewdly. "I'll buy it that far. What next?"

"Likely the raiders made camp somewhere. One grabbed the poke of loot while the other two slept. The one with the Linked Diamonds boots. The other two woke up and trailed him. Say they caught up with him at Chico, killed and buried him there. Maybe it happened that way and maybe it didn't."

Sully wrote rapidly in his notebook. "Anything to add?" he prodded.

Johnny smiled grimly. "Only what you and the sheriff already know. I found the old mare on this range. Plus one of her colts with a Circle D brand on him. And I found the boots in a six-year-old grave at Chico."

A morning later Johnny went up to Grinstead's livery for a look at Hackamore. Johnny's saddle hung on a rack near the stall. A coiled lariat on the horn reminded him of an obligation. The rope wasn't his. He'd merely borrowed it from a peon at a little plaza up at the head of Frijoli Arroyo.

Why not take a ride out that way and return the rope? Johnny felt restless anyway. He looped a hackamore over the dun's nose and tossed on a saddle. Johnny checked the loadings in his saddle rifle. At the barn office he picked up his belt and forty-five. "Be back by nightfall," he said.

Riding out East Main he made a jaunty, cleancut figure. A young rangeman fully armed and ready for any challenge. From the shop doors and walks he was seen and discussed by many. Johnny Diamond was something of a celebrity by now. A hunter of men

who was in turn hunted. The Picket-wire *Roundup* had kept up a running story on Johnny. Everyone knew his theory implicating the Circle D. And that due to his inquiries on this range many men had died and one other, Val Cranston, had disappeared. That he'd been playing up to the sheriff's daughter who, in her turn, seemed to prefer Rick Sherwood. Than Johnny Diamond no juicier foil for gossip had ever appeared in Las Perdidas. Place of the Lost Ones on a river of the same name.

Johnny held the hackamore reins high as the big dun cantered out of town. He took to the piñons, paralleling the road wherever it offered close cover for a sniper.

From the low piñon hills he dropped down onto the sagebrush floor of Frijoli Valley. Buzzards feeding on a dead calf went flapping away at his approach.

He turned up the right bank at Frijoli Arroyo, riding toward the wall of mesas heading it. Cedared hogbacks reached out like long green fingers from the mountain. Johnny kept about halfway between two of them.

The sun shone warmly. Johnny opened his jacket and loosened the collar of his shirt. He watered Hackamore at one of the occasional pools. He twisted a cigarette and rode on.

His hat jumped. And so did Johnny. He yanked the carbine from his saddle scabbard and hit the ground to his left. The shot had seemed to come from atop a cedar hogback about three hundred yards to his right.

Johnny rolled till he was behind a sand hummock. A second shot splashed sand in his eyes. He hunched down, prone on the sod. His eyes, peering over the hummock, scanned the hogback.

Hackamore, reins dragging, ran a few paces farther on and came to a stop.

A puff of smoke up there and another splash of sand near Johnny. He poked his carbine over the hummock and fired at the puff. He could hear his bullet split a cedar bough up there.

The sniper was on its very summit, well screened. There was small chance to hit him unless he advanced. He might do that, Johnny thought, by slipping down to the head of a gully. He could follow the gully to the main arroyo and in that way flank this hummock.

So Johnny decided to do the advancing himself. Crouching low, he ran to the arroyo and dropped into it. He went up it to the mouth of the gully. Still crouching, he moved up the gully. Ten patient minutes took him to cedars on the slope of the hogback.

Gravel crunched under his boots as he climbed to the summit. At the top he could look far out over the plain beyond.

Nearly a mile away he made out a retreating horseman. The horse caught the sunlight and looked like a strawberry roan. It was moving at a lope and in a few minutes disappeared.

Johnny walked down the ridge a little way to the sniper's stand. He found three empty shells there—.44's.

He tramped down to the flat below and caught Hackamore. "He figured to get us with that first shot, Hack. Soon as we started shootin' back, he gave up."

Johnny rode on toward the mesas and came, soon, to the sleeping Mexican plaza. Here he had borrowed the lariat. The same elderly Mexican was sunning himself against the adobe wall of his shack.

"Thanks for the loan," Johnny said, returning the coil of rope.

The old man nodded graciously. "*No hay de que, señor.*"

Johnny looped a leg over his saddle horn. "Anybody pass here," he inquired, "forking a strawberry roan?"

"Not today, señor. But yesterday such a rider filled his canteen at my well."

"An *Americano?*"

"*Si, señor.* Once he has worked for the Circle D, but not now. His name, I think is Fernando Smith."

Ferd Smith! Johnny rode thoughtfully back to the main valley trail. Sherwood was playing it smart, he admitted. Proclaiming right in the sheriff's office, that he'd discharged Ferd Smith!

But Smith, Johnny was willing to bet, was still drawing pay from the Circle D. With a single roving assignment—the drygulching of Johnny Diamond.

If Smith succeeded, Sherwood would be in the clear. Not a Circle D man, but an ex-Circle D man, would be guilty. All the rest of the Circle D's, apparently, were behaving themselves. "I'll guarantee they won't touch you," Sherwood had promised. And he would seem to have kept that promise even if Johnny were found shot dead by the rifle of Ferd Smith.

Johnny turned west on the main road and jogged back toward town. He hit the dust of East Main by late afternoon. He was passing Jameison's General Store when he saw Sheriff Sawyer emerge from it. Sawyer, looming tall and lean and saturnine in his long black coat, as usual looked much more like a congressman than a sheriff. His dark, angular face had a harried look as he strode down the board walk.

Johnny drew up at the curb by him. "Howdy, Sheriff. Find Cranston yet?"

"Not yet," Sawyer admitted somberly. "But sheriffs and police all over the country are looking for him. He's sure to be picked up."

Johnny grinned. "He'll be *picked* up, I betcha, if he gets up at all. Any more deadwood on Orme?"

"Nothing we can prove, young man. But someday I'll turn up evidence to hang him."

"Hope so," Johnny said.

"Have *you* anything new to report?"

"Only this, Sheriff." Johnny took off his hat and displayed two jagged holes where a bullet had passed through the crown.

Sawyer gaped. "Who," he demanded, "took a shot at you?"

"Guy on a strawberry roan," Johnny told him. "Goes by the name o' Ferd Smith. Used to work for the Circle D, I hear."

"You mean the man Rick Sherwood fired?"

"I mean," Johnny amended, "the man Sherwood *claims* he fired."

Chapter Sixteen

The Strawberry Roan

A MORNING later Johnny wakened to hear rain splashing in the streets. By noon it was a torrent and he kept restlessly indoors.

He looked out at deserted walks. Water raced from gutter to gutter down Commercial. The Picketwire was on the rampage. Ditches would flood and many an alfalfa shock would blacken. Cattle would huddle, backs humped, on the lee of the buttes and cedar brakes.

Where, Johnny wondered, in all this stormy world was Val Cranston? Was his body in the river? Or had he really taken flight?

For three days the rain penned Johnny in his hotel. All he could do was fret and wait. He absorbed daily the speculative editorials of the local paper, most of them about the missing brand inspector.

Editor Sully clearly concurred with Sheriff Sawyer: that all guilt except Cranston's centered at Chico; that Syd Orme was in it up to his neck but had covered his tracks by assigning all the dirty work to men like Diego Salvador and Jakie Kim. Sherwood, they said, was just a practical cattleman with a few hard-boiled lead-throwers on his payroll as proper defense against mesa outlaws and rustlers.

The bullet hole through Johnny's hat leaked out and Sully, agreeing with Sawyer, had a ready explanation. *It seems*, he wrote, *that one Ferd Smith, having been discharged for rowdyism by the Circle D, lost no time in getting himself a job at Chico.*

The score against Cranston mounted when Sheriff Sawyer, making a quick trip to Denver, returned with a solid fact. The records clearly gave the date three years ago on which a double check had been placed on the weighing. Only a day later Cranston had quit his job.

It looks, Sully editorialized, *like Brother Cranston lost interest in that job the minute opportunity for graft was gone. Being a man of plausibility and persuasion, he then got on as brand inspector in our own community. But while it is true he got the appointment through Ronaldo Rivera on the recommendation of Rick Sherwood, it is absurd to suggest that either of those highly respected citizens could have known about his character.*

Johnny had just digested this when a rain-soaked stockman came into the hotel lobby. He was Buck Perry of the Lazy M.

"What's new on the San Ysidro?" Johnny asked him.

"Rain," Buck complained. "And right when our second cutting is in the shock. Everything else is all right. Ed Sopers's leg is on the mend. I've put Chuck Wiggins on regular on account Slim McBride's gonna quit right after the fall roundup."

"What's Slim quittin' for?"

Perry smiled. "Didn't you hear? Slim's gettin' married in November. Gal up in Denver. Slim's been sparkin' her for a coupla years."

"Howcome," Johnny inquired, "it took him so long?"

"Her old man," Buck explained, "won't let her hitch up with an ordinary bunkhouse puncher. Says Slim has to have a place of his own. So 'bout a year ago Slim filed a homestead down on Grosella Crick and he's built a cabin on it. So now the gal's old man says okay."

Buck noticed the bullet holes in Johnny's hat. "So Orme's still got a man gunnin' for you!" he remarked dryly.

"Either Orme or Sherwood," Johnny countered.

The older man rubbed the stubble on his chin dubiously. "Maybe you're wrong about Sherwood, Johnny. You told Wiggins to poke around and see if Orme's a silent partner in the Circle D. So Chuck went over and spent a coupla days with 'em, like he was huntin' fer strays. He came back convinced that Sherwood's an ordinary independent stockman, same as I am."

It made Johnny feel lonely and discouraged. Even his best friends seemed to be deserting him. They were all taking the Sawyer point of view. "I'll make a bet with you, Buck, that Ferd Smith's still on Sherwood's payroll."

Perry shook his head. "Don't let yourself get all hog-tied with prejudice, Johnny. Think back to how this thing started. You went to Chico and had Frankie Valdez shine your boots. You asked if he'd ever seen any boots like 'em. It got Frankie's wind up, because he knew about a dead man buried with boots like that. He scurried straight to Orme and told him you were hot on the trail. Orme got itchy and sent for Diego Salvador. 'Diego,' he says, 'Frankie Valdez knows too much and he talks too much. Get rid of him. And while you're at it, get rid of a Texas kid named Diamond.' Point is, Rick Sherwood couldn't possibly have been in on that. He was thirty miles away at his ranch."

"The bet still stands," Johnny said stubbornly. "Let's make it a new hat."

ON THE FOURTH DAY the rain petered out. An item in the paper caught Johnny's eye. Buck Perry, it said, was shipping a few cars of canners to Denver. The shipment would go out the next day on the D & RG narrow gauge from Chico.

Johnny was lonesome. Chico being only a few miles down the river, here was a chance to see some of his friends from the Lazy M. Early in the morning he saddled Hackamore.

After days of restless inactivity, saddle leather between his knees felt good to Johnny. He cantered down the muddy bank and forded the riffles at Chico. The town sprawled there brown and ugly, just as he'd last seen it except that now the streets held mire instead of dust. The clatter of a switch engine and a bawling of cattle meant that the Lazy M shipment was being loaded.

At the terminal yard on the edge of town Johnny found three narrow-gauge stock cars spotted opposite a chute pen. The two men hazing cows up the chute were Chuck Wiggins and Slim McBride. A new inspector was checking brands.

"Hi, Johnny," Slim McBride yelled. "This is off limits for you, ain't it?"

"I couldn't win an election over here," Johnny conceded with a grin. He dismounted and helped them load the last car.

A switch engine bunted the three cars to a freight train which was already made up. A caboose was coupled on and the freight was soon ready for its two hundred mile run north to Denver.

"Which one of you fellas," Johnny asked, "is gonna do the chaperonin'?"

"Me," Slim said, and climbed on the caboose. "Take care of my bronc, Chuck. I'll be seein' you in a week."

Shortly the string of little cars pulled out, Slim waving gaily from the caboose platform.

"Howcome," Johnny asked, "he's gonna stay up there a week?"

"His gal lives in Denver," Wiggins explained, "so Buck told him to stay up there long as he wants to, just so he gets back for the fall roundup. Right after the roundup Slim's quittin' to get married."

"So I heard," Johnny said. "You headin' back to the ranch?"

"Not till tomorrow," Chuck said.

"Buck told me I can stay all night in Perdidas."

They mounted, Chuck leading Slim's horse, and slogged up the miry track-front street. At the intersection with the main saloon street Johnny reined to a sudden stop.

"Look, Chuck. Do you see what I see?"

He was staring at the hitchrack in front of the most ambitious town dive. Syd Orme's place, the Peso de Oro.

"All I see," Wiggins said, "is a strawberry roan tied there."

Johnny took off his hat and showed the bullet holes in it. "Guy on a strawberry roan did it. Name of Ferd Smith."

"They's lots of strawberry roans. Maybe this ain't the same one."

"Let's go look at the brand."

They turned up the main street and dismounted at the Peso de Oro. "It's a Slash 7," Chuck said, pointing to the strawberry's right hip. "Slash 7's a big horse ranch down around Wagon Mound."

Johnny was disappointed. "The man who tied him here, Chuck, oughta be inside. Let's go in and see if he's Ferd Smith."

"You sure it was him took a pop atcha?"

"No," Johnny admitted. "The guy was almost a mile off by the time I sighted him. But his bronc looked like a strawberry. The day before that, Ferd Smith was forking a strawberry when he filled his canteen at Frijoli plaza."

"I'll cover you," Chuck said, "in case he starts anything." He pushed the latticed doors back and stepped into the barroom.

Johnny followed, ready for trouble. Ferd Smith wasn't there. The gross hulk of Syd Orme stood back of the bar. He was swabbing it with a rag.

"Hi, gents," he greeted with an overdone affability. "Step up and have one on the house. Don't often see you gents over this way."

"No thanks," Johnny said.

At this lazy noon hour only two customers were in evidence. One was a bleary, bearded man with no visible weapon. The woman who sat drinking beer with him was Mamie Griggs, the one who'd wrapped a bandage around Diego Salvador's sprained wrist.

Wiggins spoke to the man with her. "That your strawberry roan outside?"

The man gave him a surly look. "It ain't, mister. Not that it's any of your business. Anything else you wanna know?"

Chuck turned to the bar. "Whose bronc is it, Orme?"

Orme's stare was vacant. "How would *I* know?"

"How long," Johnny inquired, "since you've seen Ferd Smith?"

"Can't recollect knowin' any Ferd Smith," Orme said.

A door giving to an alley stood open. Johnny felt sure that Smith had been in here only a few minutes ago. Observing the approach of Johnny with a friend, the man could easily slip away by the alley.

Wiggins led the way out to the front walk. "We can just hang around," he suggested, "and see who claims the bronc."

Standing on tiptoes, Johnny peered over the latticed doors. He was just in time to see Orme beckon Mamie Griggs to the bar. The woman listened to some whispered instruction. Immediately she left the barroom, almost bumping into Johnny as she stepped out on the walk.

Her high heels clicking on the

boards, she moved briskly toward the next corner. Her errand seemed obvious.

"Let's tag along, Chuck." Up the walk they went, on the trail of Mamie Griggs.

"It's a cinch," Chuck said. "Ferd Smith ducked out the alley way. Orme knows we're watchin' his bronc, so he sends Mamie to warn Smith he'd better keep away from it."

When they turned the corner they saw the woman a block ahead of them, still walking fast. She looked back over her shoulder, then increased her pace. "Keep your gun limber," Chuck advised. "Might be she's just lurin' us past some upstairs window where Smith's sittin' with a cocked rifle."

The humiliating truth dawned on them only when Mamie Griggs, after leading them four blocks away, doubled back to the Peso de Oro. They saw her re-enter the place, and they heard Orme's mocking laugh.

The strawberry roan was gone. Ferd Smith, clearly, had been inside all the time, perhaps crouched behind the bar. Chuck grimaced sheepishly. "Let's get the hell outa here."

They rode upriver to Las Perdidas and on Main Street there Chuck's face brightened. "All our luck ain't bad, Johnny."

Johnny saw Flo Sawyer and Felicia Rivera turning in at the drugstore.

Chuck dismounted eagerly. "And us wastin' time over at Chico!"

Johnny caught up with him, not at all confident of his welcome. He remembered Flo's coolness at their last encounter.

"Lucky thing," Chuck chattered brightly, "we stopped long enough to wash our face and hands when we forded the river. Otherwise we'd smell like them cattle cars we just loaded."

Chuck breezed into the drugstore with Johnny at his heels. The young ladies were pricing perfumery. Chuck pretended surprise at meeting them.

"Well look who's here, Johnny! Our Sunday-best girls!" He swept the sombrero from his fire-red hair. "Howdy, *lindas*. What about a round of ice-cream sodas? Johnny an' me are feelin' rich."

Felicia smiled graciously. "It will be a pleasure, señor."

"There you go!" Wiggins complained. "Callin' me names again. The right name's Chuck and I been lyin' awake nights dreamin' of yuh."

Johnny looked at Flo and grinned awkwardly. "He says it better than I can. I've been hopin' you're not mad at me."

She laughed. "Mad at you? Nonsense. I *could* like you, Johnny Diamond, if you just wouldn't say such awful things about my friends."

"I won't say another word about 'em," he promised solemnly.

They sat down at a table and Chuck ordered sodas. "This is what I call cozy," he exclaimed irrepressibly. "What about lettin' us two lonely cowboys come up to see yuh tonight?"

"I'm so sorry," Felicia broke in, "but tonight we have an engagement, with Uncle Adam and Mr. Sherwood."

"And tomorrow," Flo added, "Felicia's going back to the ranch. I'm going with her to spend a few days out there."

Chuck turned mournfully to Johnny. "If that ain't just our luck!"

Felicia's next words brightened him again. "Why don't you come out to see us, some evening late in the week?"

"It's a date!" Chuck exclaimed. "Okay, Johnny?"

Johnny looked at Flo. "I'd sure like to come. Can we make it Friday?"

"We could," Flo said hesitantly, "except for—"

"What?"

"That hole in your hat." Johnny's bullet-riddled hat lay on the table at his elbow. "It's sixteen miles to the ranch. You'd have to ride out there alone. And back again late at night."

Johnny flushed. "Don't worry about that sniper. Anyway I can't let him pen me up here in town."

"Sure you can't," Wiggins agreed. "Friday evening then. I'll meet you there at eight o'clock, Johnny."

"No," Felicia corrected. "You will arrive at six. For *comida*."

Her Spanish hospitality wouldn't permit guests to ride sixteen miles, arriving tired and hungry, unless they also came for supper.

Flo looked anxiously at Johnny. "You'll be careful? I mean—Father and I worry about you a good deal—"

Johnny's spirits took a bound. "Chuck and I'll show up at six Friday."

"You mentioned your friend Slim McBride," Felicia murmured. "Why do you envy him?"

"He's got a girl," Johnny said, "who likes him."

"They're gonna get married," Chuck put in, "right after roundup." He turned buoyantly to Johnny. "So cheer up, pal. If Slim can do it, so can we. Just give us time and a couple o' more moonlight dates. We'll see you at six Friday, *lindas*."

Chuck paid the check and they left the drugstore, leaving the girls to finish their shopping there.

That night they had gallery seats at the opera house. Looking down they could see the box which held Adam Sawyer, his daughter, his country niece, and his daughter's escort. Some of the afternoon lift oozed away from Johnny, then. Sherwood looked so personable and so solidly eligible there, whispering vividly into the ear of Flo Sawyer. In war or in love, he'd be a hard man to beat.

That was Tuesday. Early Wednesday morning Chuck Wiggins, leading Slim McBride's horse, left for the Perry ranch on the San Ysidro.

Johnny spent the day refurbishing his wardrobe, adding a green silk shirt. Thursday he polished his Linked Diamonds boots. Friday morning he went to the livery barn and personally curried Hackamore. When you went calling at the Rivera hacienda, you must at least look like a caballero. The holes in his hat fretted Johnny a little. But his purse was too flat to afford a new one. "We'd better get us a job somewhere, Hack."

Why not try getting on with Buck Perry for the roundup? He decided to go home with Wiggins after the date, and see if the Lazy M could use him as a hand.

At four in the afternoon he rode out of town. Wiggins would be leaving the Lazy M at about this same time, on this same road, but approaching the Bar L from the opposite direction.

Johnny's forty-five was in his holster and his carbine was in the saddle scabbard. There was always a chance of ambush. So again Johnny left the road, detouring through the piñons, paralleling the trail about a half mile on the upper side.

He rode leisurely, a bit dreamily. The senator was away at Denver. So no one would be there except himself and Chuck and the two girls. And the servants, of course.

Thinking pleasantly of these things,

Johnny rode a trifle less cautiously than usual. It was five o'clock when he came to Frijoli Arroyo. He struck this deep wide wash just where he'd crossed it the last time, about a half mile above the road.

He paused for a moment on its brink, his eyes searching cedars on a hogback about three hundred yards away. A distant rifleman seemed the only possible hazard. It didn't occur to him that an enemy might be lurking in a crack of this very bank, posted there because Johnny had twice before used this crossing.

The whirr of a rope came just as he slid his horse down the steep bank into the arroyo's bed. The loop settled neatly over his shoulders and was jerked tight, pinioning his arms to his sides.

The same hard jerk pulled Johnny from the saddle. He landed with dazing force on the shale bed of the wash. Then he was aware of a man—Ferd Smith—covering him with a gun. Smith stood there with his legs wide apart, keeping the rope taut with one hand and aiming a forty-five with the other.

"A cinch!" he crowed. "Figgered you'd come this way."

Johnny sprawled with his arms pinioned. There wasn't a thing he could do.

"On your belly, mister," Ferd Smith commanded. "Face down to the shale."

With a gun on him, Johnny had to obey. Smith crawled toward him along the rope, keeping it tight. His hand darted down to snatch Johnny's gun.

Johnny felt his hands being drawn behind his back. Then came a clink of metal, steel links clamping on each wrist. Handcuffs! "That Mex constable down at Chico," Smith chuckled, "gets kinda careless sometimes. I snitched me two pair of 'em right out of his shack."

The rope was still tight, making Johnny doubly helpless. Hackamore was standing by. Ferd Smith dallied the rope around the saddle horn. Then he led the big dun up the arroyo, dragging Johnny like a sled. Around a bend in the bank a strawberry roan stood tethered to a root.

Having been dragged some fifty yards like a calf to a branding fire, Johnny felt burning bruises from head to foot. Ferd Smith loosened the rope.

"You can set up now," he invited, "long as you don't get funny."

Johnny wriggled to a sitting posture. Disarmed and with hands cuffed behind his back, there was no chance either to fight or to escape. "Who are you working for?" he asked dully. "Orme or Sherwood?"

"Both." The admission came cheerfully from Ferd Smith.

It gave Johnny a queer sense of triumph. Not that it could do him any good now. But at least it proved he'd been right all along. Sherwood was in it with Orme. It would be almost worth this defeat, Johnny thought, if Flo could hear that concession from Ferd Smith.

Flo, who at this very minute was expecting him as a dinner guest! What would she think when he didn't show up?

Squatting on his spurs, Ferd Smith rolled a cigarette. "Personally, I ain't got a thing ag'in' you, kid. This is business. A guy has to make a livin', you understand."

"You must make a nice thing out of it," Johnny said dryly. "How much do you get per kill?"

The man grinned. "I don't work for no chicken feed."

The gun hung loosely by its trigger guard from his finger but the man seemed in no hurry to get the business over with.

"What are you waiting for?" Johnny asked bitterly.

"Nightfall," Ferd Smith explained. "The place I'm takin' you is below the road. We got to cross the road to get there. In daylight, someone might come along and see us."

It meant a brief respite but Johnny could see no hope in it. "Where'bouts below the road? To Sherwood at the Circle D?"

Smith smiled slyly and shook his head.

"To Orme at Chico?"

The man chuckled. "Guess again, kid. It's the last place anyone'd ever look fer yuh."

That was all Johnny could get out of him at the moment. The sun had now set. Ferd Smith disposed of half a dozen more smokes, waiting patiently.

Where, Johnny pondered, would be the last place anyone would look for him? And why didn't this man shoot him right here? Was he playing some double game of his own, needing a hostage for a better deal with Orme and Sherwood? Anyone looking for him would reason that Smith had taken

him to the cover of mountain timber. Perhaps to some cave up under the rimrock. Instead, he was to be taken to open country below the road. Johnny couldn't imagine a safe hiding-place there.

Twilight faded to dusk and dusk to darkness.

"On your feet," Ferd Smith ordered, "and stand on that drift log."

Johnny stood up, hands manacled behind him, and stepped up on the log. Ferd Smith led Johnny's horse to the log. "Step into the saddle, kid."

Johnny put his left foot in a stirrup and swung his right leg over the saddle. He was now mounted but without the use of his hands. To make sure he wouldn't dismount, Smith tied Johnny's belt securely to the saddle horn.

After which the man put a long lead rope on Hackamore and mounted his own strawberry roan. "We're on our way, kid."

He rode up out of the arroyo, leading the dun with Johnny astride of it. They proceeded at a trot toward the road from town to the Rivera ranch.

All Johnny knew about his destination was that they must cross that road. A road frequently traveled by day, although infrequently by night. He took his left foot out of the stirrup. Its boot had a spur. Johnny groped with it until the spur hooked in the mesh of the saddle's girth.

Then he drew his leg up slightly, pulling gently. The boot came part way off. They came to the road and just as they crossed it Johnny slipped his left foot entirely out of the boot. He kicked it, dislodging the spur from the girth. The boot fell squarely between wagon ruts in the road. The sound of the fall was no greater than a hoof thud on rock or clod by one of the horses.

Ferd Smith, not even turning his head, rode on. Johnny followed astride Hackamore. The forsaken boot, with a design of Linked Diamonds circling its top, lay neatly in the middle of the road.

Chapter Seventeen

Payoff

CHUCK WIGGINS presented himself at the Don Rivera hacienda promptly at six o'clock. Miguel ushered him to the *sala*. Flo and Felicia were waiting there.

"Hi," the redhead greeted as he breezed in. "Johnny showed up yet?"

"He will be here soon," Felicia assured him.

Flo looked at the clock and her face registered a faint worry. She moved restlessly to a spinet piano and strummed the keys there.

Chuck chattered with Felicia. Minutes sped by and Johnny Diamond didn't appear. Flo got up and stood at a window.

"I can't understand," she worried. "Something may have happened to him. What do you think, Chuck?"

"Shucks," he said. "Johnny's all right. Right good at taking care of himself, that boy is. Chances are somethin' came up in town."

But Flo wasn't at all reassured. If something had detained Johnny, why hadn't he sent word he couldn't come?

At seven o'clock Felicia decided not to hold dinner any longer. She led them across the patio to the dining *sala*. Four places were laid at a table there.

A middle-aged Mexican maid in a white apron stood ready to serve. When only three sat down, she looked askance at her mistress.

Felicia smiled nervously. "I'm afraid he's not coming, Dolores. You may bring the *cazuela* now."

Dolores Valdez showed acute disappointment. "*Que lastima!*" she sighed. "After I have made for him the *torta de grosella!*"

As she disappeared to the kitchen Felicia explained to Chuck Wiggins. "Our new maid has much gratitude and affection for your friend. He has changed her whole life, she thinks, and so he is her great hero."

"Where," Chuck asked, "does currant pie come in?"

"Once," Felicia said, "he has told her that he likes it very much. So today, when Dolores learns he will come for *comida*, she makes him a pie of wild currants."

"That's all right," Chuck said. "I'll eat his share myself."

Flo didn't taste her *cazuela*. She barely touched the other delicious courses brought in by Dolores.

All her impulse was to send Chuck Wiggins, or Miguel, on a fast ride to Las Perdidas. But when you make a date with a young man and he doesn't appear, you don't dash out looking for him!

After dinner Flo again stood at a window. She stared at the darkness out there, cut thinly by starlight. She remembered a bullet hole in Johnny's hat. A cold terror grew inside of her.

IN THE SAME STARLIGHT Ferd Smith, leading Johnny's horse, came to a gate in a pasture fence. He dismounted, opened it, led the horses through. "We're almost there, kid."

Johnny, hands linked behind his

back, sat helplessly astride Hackamore. As nearly as he could reckon they'd come about five miles since crossing the road. They'd angled northeast, toward Grosella Creek, and he knew that no land was fenced over this way except the meadows and pastures of Senator Rivera. This must be the big winter pasture of the Bar L, down creek from the hacienda.

Ferd Smith closed the gate, remounted his strawberry roan. "Last place they'd ever look," he chuckled as he proceeded onward.

A line of cottonwoods loomed ahead. That would be Grosella Creek, which watered this pasture. Slim McBride, Johnny recalled, had told him about it one time. Slim had filed a homestead in it with the senator's approval.

In midpasture, near the creek brush, they came to a log cabin. It loomed like a black square box in the starlight. This, Johnny guessed, would be Slim McBride's homestead house. The one to which he planned to bring a bride soon after the next roundup.

"Last place they'd ever look," Ferd Smith repeated as he dismounted at the cabin. "Who'd ever figger I'd take you to the shack of one of your best friends?"

"How do you know," Johnny asked him, "that McBride himself won't show up here?"

"'Cause he went to Denver fer a week. I was in Chico the other day and I seen him leave with them three cars o' canners." Smith removed the tie which held Johnny's belt to the saddle horn. "Hop off, kid."

Johnny slid to the ground and was marched into the cabin. Ferd Smith lighted a candle. It exposed the fact of a missing boot.

"What happened to it?" the man demanded.

"Snagged it on a greasewood bush as we rode along," Johnny told him, "and it came off."

"How far back?"

Johnny shrugged. "Two-three miles, maybe."

The man didn't seem much alarmed about it. A boot under a greasewood bush on the open range wasn't likely to be soon found.

"I been holin' up here fer a coupla days," Smith said, "gettin' things ready."

He produced a second pair of handcuffs from beneath a cot mattress. With these he clamped Johnny's bootless ankle to a spike he'd driven into the floor. Then he took an ax and pounded the spike flat.

He drove a second spike into a log wall. His gun made Johnny face that wall. Ferd Smith then freed one wrist and linked the other to the wall spike. When the wall spike was flattened, Johnny stood there with one free leg and one free hand.

Ferd Smith pushed a small table in front of Johnny and placed a chair so Johnny could sit down. Next he pulled off the prisoner's remaining boot.

"What's the idea?" Johnny asked.

The man's eyes narrowed slyly. "To prove I got you."

"To Orme and Sherwood?"

"You said it. They been holdin' out on me, kid. Owe me fer two jobs, them buzzards do. Yours makes three. So I'm keepin' you fer a pet till they pay off."

"The two jobs they owe you for," Johnny suggested, "are José Pacheco and Val Cranston?"

Ferd Smith didn't deny it. He put a bucket of creek water and a loaf of stale bread on the table in front of

Johnny. "Chances are you won't need it, kid. Chances are they'll pay off. If they do I'll come back and finish up."

"And if they don't?"

"I'll head fer Old Mex and send a card back to the sheriff tellin' where you are. He can turn you loose and then hang Orme and Sherwood."

"What about Alf Sansone?"

"Hang him too, if you wanta. The whole outfit's got it comin' to 'em, from Orme down."

"You mean Orme owns the Circle D?"

"A good-size slice of it. He set Sherwood and Sansone up in the cow business six years ago, after they trailed Alex Pardee here from Texas and killed him in Orme's bar."

"It was Pardee's body I dug up at Chico?"

Smith nodded. An evil grin rode his face. "Don't get no hopes up, kid. Chances are them guys'll come across. If they do you'll see me again in the morning."

He blew out the candle and went out with Johnny's Linked Diamonds boot. Presumably he'd hide Hackamore in the creek thickets, riding his strawberry roan to the Circle D.

In the blackness of the cabin, Johnny jerked futilely at his irons. He was like a galley slave chained there, free only to move one arm and one leg. The ironic nearness of potential rescue maddened him. He couldn't be more than a half dozen miles down creek from the Rivera hacienda. Too far for a gunshot to be heard, even if he could fire one. At this very minute Chuck Wiggins was dining at that ranch house with Flo and Felicia. They'd wonder where he was. They might suspect he'd been ambushed on the road. But they'd never imagine he was in Slim McBride's cabin down the creek, right in the middle of a Bar L pasture.

The steel links cut cruelly at ankle and wrist as he fought vainly to break them. They bruised his flesh and crucified his spirit, yet his mind had never been clearer. Almost in exact detail, now, he could piece out the story of three renegade raiders in Texas.

Ferd Smith had given them names: Sherwood, Sansone, Pardee. Pardee, wearing the Linked Diamonds boots, had stolen the loot from the others and fled to Colorado. Sherwood and Sansone, in pursuit, had caught up with him in Orme's bar, killing him.

What then? Orme would snatch his shotgun from under the bar and cover the intruders. What's the idea, he'd demand, of gunning one of my customers? Because he stole money from us, they'd say. And Orme would see a chance to cut in. "Okay," he'd say, "we'll give the bar porter fifty bucks to bury the body and split the rest of it three ways."

The bar porter had been Frankie Valdez. So for a tip Frankie had buried the body, with its Linked Diamonds boots on. No wonder he remembered the boots! Fearful and superstitious, no wonder he'd cautioned his wife against setting up her washtub on that grave!

Other pieces of the jigsaw slipped into place, although more loosely. Orme had backed Sherwood and Sansone in the establishment of a shoestring stock outfit which later became the Circle D. Orme, the backer and silent partner, had remained at his Chico bar. Three years ago they'd schemed to have Cranston appointed brand inspector, so that they could ship car after car of their neighbors' cattle from Thacker.

But now that he'd figured it out, it

only made Johnny feel the more hopelessly doomed. Except for some miracle of rescue, the secret was sure to die with him here.

FERD SMITH LOPED THROUGH THE NIGHT. A Linked Diamonds boot was tied to a latigo of Smith's saddle. It was midnight when he rode into the Circle D ranch yard. Lamplight glowed at a window of the main house.

With the boot in hand, Ferd Smith rapped at a door there. Sherwood's voice summoned him to come in.

He found Sherwood playing stud poker with Alf Sansone. A brandy bottle stood between them. Sansone's cold flat face had temper on it. He'd been drinking too much and the chips were all on Sherwood's side of the table.

Sherwood glared at Ferd Smith. "I told you to stay away from here."

Smith tossed a boot to him. "Take a look, Rick. I got that Texas kid. Got him all wrapped up for a slug."

That startled Sherwood. "You mean you haven't gunned him yet?"

"Nope," Ferd Smith answered cheerfully. "And he won't get gunned till I'm paid off. Not only for him, but for what you owe me on the Cranston job. And the half you still owe me on the Pacheco job. Comes to six thousand in all. Slip me, Rick." He held out an open palm.

Sansone jerked out a gun and stood up. "I'll slip you a chunk o' lead. Who do you think you are, anyway?"

Sherwood intervened cagily. "Sit down, Alf." He turned placatingly to Smith. "Where've you got him, Ferd?"

A mocking grin answered him. "Where his friends'll pick him up in a few days, unless I go back there and knock him off. Which I sure won't do if you don't quit stallin' and pay me off. He knows the works, that kid does. Enough to hang the pack of you a mile high."

Fear shadowed Sherwood's face. He poured himself a drink. "I don't keep that much money at the ranch, Ferd. Orme'll pay you off, soon as the job's done."

"He'll pay me off tonight," Smith decreed stubbornly, "or the job won't get done at all. Take it or leave it, you guys."

Again Sansone was on his feet, livid, finger crooked on a trigger. Again Sherwood made him sit down. Ferd Smith held a hole ace right now, and he knew it. This Linked Diamonds boot proved the man was holding its owner somewhere. Everything would blow up if the kid escaped to tell what he knew. War would erupt on the Picketwire, with every honest gun on the range turned against the Circle D.

"You win, Ferd." Sherwood's tone had complete capitulation in it. "Alf, fan the breeze for Chico and get Syd Orme. Tell him to bring along the cash for Ferd Smith. All of it."

Ferd Smith, reaching for the brandy, failed to see one of Sherwood's eyelids droop furtively. The wink was caught only by Alf Sansone.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Showdown Siege

IF IT'S okay with you," Chuck Wiggins said at midnight, "I'll just bed down at the bunkshack. At the first crack o' dawn I'll light out for town. I got to find out why Johnny didn't show up."

Flo stared at him, her face milk-

pale. "I shouldn't," she lamented, "have told him he could come!"

"You may stay in the guest room," Felicia invited.

But Chuck preferred the bunkhouse. He went there and found a bunk. He lay down without undressing. Sleep evaded him as he tried to think of some harmless reason which might have detained Johnny. Nothing made sense except an ambush on the trail.

When at the first peep of daylight he went outside, Flo was emerging from the corral with two horses. She'd saddled them herself.

"I'm going with you, Chuck."

"No sense in it," he argued. "You better stay right here."

But nothing could stop Flo from going. "It was my fault," she said wretchedly, "for telling him he could come."

Chuck buckled his gun belt around his waist. The saddle scabbard held a carbine. Flo's saddle had one too. She mounted and spurred through the gate.

Wiggins caught up with her at the creek bridge. Flo took a canteen from her saddle horn and passed it to Wiggins. It was warm to his touch, and what he upturned to his lips was hot coffee.

"Thanks, Flo. You think of everything."

"I think of everything too late," she amended bitterly. "Before I said Johnny could come, I should have thought about poor José Pacheco. And Ernesto. And Val Cranston who disappeared. I should have remembered Diego Salvador. And all those other ruffians from Chico."

She spurred ahead again and Chuck had trouble keeping up. They topped a low piñon ridge and dropped down into Frijoli Valley. The light was bright by now.

It was Flo who first saw the shiny black thing in the road. They rode on toward it and could see that it was polished leather.

Flo gave a low cry. "It's a boot. It's Johnny's boot!"

Wiggins leaned from the saddle and scooped it up.

"He got this far," Chuck said grimly. His first thought was that Johnny had been shot out of his saddle right here. Then he saw that there was no near and convenient cover for a sniper. Anyone waiting to ambush Johnny would have picked a better place.

"Look, Flo. Two broncs crossed the road here at right angles. One shod and one unshod. Single file. The shod horse went last."

Johnny's dun, they both knew, was shod. The ground near by showed no mark of conflict such as bloodstains or empty gun shells. The tracks looked as if he'd crossed the road driving an unshod horse ahead of him, dropping one of his boots as he did so.

Except for the conspicuous boot, Chuck would have paid no attention to horse tracks crossing the road. Grazing range horses were always crossing from one side of the road to the other. But the boot meant something. It tightened Chuck Wiggins and made him like a steel spring.

Flo turned a harassed face to Wiggins. "Let's see where they go, Chuck."

The horse tracks led slightly east of north, across the flat and open greasewood range. Chuck followed them a little way, Flo keeping at his stirrup. They continued in single file, the unshod horse ahead.

"The unshod horse," Flo suggested, "could be leading Johnny's."

"Okay," Chuck said. "You hit for town and get the sheriff."

"Not," she protested, "till I see where—" She didn't speak the rest of her thought. Chuck knew what it was, because his own was the same. Johnny, either dead or wounded, could have been laid across a saddle to be led far out into the sage, there to be dumped out of sight in some arroyo. Maybe he'd had enough life left, while crossing the road, to drop a boot there.

So Chuck rode on down the line of tracks, bleakly expectant of the worst. But nothing he could say would make Flo Sawyer go back. She kept stubbornly with him.

A mile brought them to a gully. Chuck peered into it fearfully, braced to see a bullet-riddled body there. But the tracks of two horses crossed the gully and kept on.

Mile after mile they kept on, until they sighted a fence ahead. "It's the fence," Flo said, "of Uncle Ronald's lower pasture."

The tracks led to a gate in it. When they got there, Chuck saw boot prints where a man had dismounted to open the gate.

Within the big pasture the tracks led on toward a creek bottom where a line of greenery angled northeasterly. Grosella Creek. The grass grew lush here, kept fresh for the wintering of cattle now summering on mountain range. "If he was headin' for the Circle D," Chuck muttered, "I can't see why he'd cut through this pasture. He could have stayed outside the fence and made a beeline for it."

"Look," Flo cried, pointing. "Isn't that Slim McBride's cabin?"

The cabin stood far down the bottom and snug against the creek thickets. The bark of its logs was fresh and unscaled.

As the horse tracks led toward it Flo felt a glimmer of hope. It was hard for her to imagine anything sinister about that cabin.

"Hurry, Chuck." Flo raced ahead. But Chuck caught up with her to advise caution.

"Might be that somebody's in there with Johnny. Holdin' a gun on him, maybe. Let's slip up on it through the brush."

They veered to the creek. Here dense thickets along the bank screened. them. They followed down the creek bank, pushing through brush, until they came opposite the cabin. And there they found further reassurance. Tethered in a thicket was one saddled horse, and one only. He was Johnny Diamond's big dun gelding.

The absence of a second horse suggested that only Johnny was in the cabin. Chuck looked the saddle over carefully. There was no blood on it. Chuck plucked the carbine from his scabbard and advanced toward the house. "You stay here, Flo."

He advanced cautiously, carbine at the ready, on a chance that a captor might be inside with Johnny. Chuck was almost there when he heard a step back of him. It was Flo. She too had taken a carbine from her saddle scabbard.

"Get back in the brush," Chuck ordered roughly.

But she kept at his heels. She was there when Chuck Wiggins kicked the door open and looked inside.

They both saw Johnny Diamond. He was alone in there. Seated at a table with water and bread in front of him, he looked almost comfortable. Sight of Chuck's red head brought a pale grin to his face. Then, beyond Chuck, he saw Flo Sawyer.

He shouted hoarsely to her. "You

shouldn't've come here, Flo." He tried to stand up but a manacle on his ankle pulled him down.

"Oh, Johnny!" Flo ran to him. "It's all my fault—I've been such a fool!" She took up his right hand and tried to pull the link from his wrist. Then tears of fury came to her eyes. "Don't just stand there, Chuck," she said fiercely. "Get it off of him. Who did it, Johnny?"

"Guy named Smith," Johnny said. "There's an ax around here somewhere, Chuck. You'll need it to loosen these spikes."

"Where did he go?" Chuck demanded.

"To the Circle D."

"What for?"

"For a payoff. Get busy with that ax, cowboy."

Chuck couldn't at once find the ax. Ferd Smith might have taken it outside. Chuck went out and circled the cabin. He came back with an old spade which Slim McBride had used to ditch the premises for drainage.

"We haven't got too much time," Johnny warned. "That guy's likely to show up any minute."

"Watch for him, Flo," Wiggins directed. "And better close the door." He set to work with the spade trying to pry up the bent spike in the floor. Flo stood at a window, her eyes searching distance toward the Circle D.

"He left here about twelve hours ago," Johnny told them. "He could have got to the Circle D by midnight and he oughta be back by now. Unless he's not coming back at all."

The spike was stubborn. Chuck could not readily get the spade blade under it. He tried the spike on the wall. It came up a little way and the handcuff link slipped free. Johnny could now move both arms at will, although a manacle still dangled from his right wrist.

Chuck returned savagely to an attack on the floor spike. "Why mightn't he not come back, Johnny?"

"He said he won't if they don't pay him off. For three jobs. Pacheco, Cranston, and me."

A cry of alarm came from Flo at the window. "I see him! He's coming. Look!"

Wiggins joined her and looked out. A horseman was loping toward the cabin on a strawberry roan.

"Don't let him in," Flo cried frantically. She rushed to the door and was about to bolt it when Chuck stopped her.

"No," the redhead decided grimly. "Let him walk right in. He can't see our broncs in the brush. Stand flat against the wall, Flo. Right there. We'll let that blood-hungry buzzard sashay right in."

Flo stood with her back to the wall at one side of the door. Chuck drew his forty-five and took a similar position on the other side.

Johnny sat down at the table, his left ankle still chained to the floor. He placed his right hand, with its dangling manacle, against the wall spike.

Flo held her breath. She could hear the beatings of her heart. She looked at Johnny and he smiled at her.

Ferd Smith drew up in front. The man jerked a carbine from his saddle scabbard and dismounted.

He pushed the door open and stood on the threshold there. All he saw was his manacled prisoner, seated at a table.

"Sorry, kid." Ferd Smith raised the rifle. "Them guys came through. So what else can I do?"

Wiggins, clubbing his forty-five, crashed its barrel down on the man's head. Ferd Smith toppled inward, stunned, on the cabin floor.

A grin curved the lips of Johnny Diamond. "Thanks, Chuck. Maybe I can do the same for you sometime."

Chuck dragged Ferd Smith a little farther into the cabin so that Flo could close the door. "Oughta be handcuff keys on him," Chuck said. He kneeled to search the man.

From a coat pocket he brought out a roll of currency. "He collected, all right," Chuck confirmed.

Flo stood by, staring remorsefully at Johnny. "He meant Sherwood and Orme, didn't he? They paid him! I've been so stupid, Johnny."

"No such thing," Johnny protested. "You've been smart as a whip, gettin' me out of this mess. Look in his pants, Chuck."

In a pocket of Ferd Smith's pants Wiggins found a small key. It fit both pairs of handcuffs and Johnny was soon free.

"They'll come in right handy," Chuck said, "to use on this Circle D killer. Roll him over, Johnny." They rolled Ferd Smith over on his back, clamping one pair of irons on wrists and the other on ankles. Then Chuck picked up a bucket and poured water on the man's face.

Smith opened his eyes, groaning, and looked up at them with a glassy stare. "I'll get the broncs," Chuck said, "and we'll pack him to town."

He opened the door and stepped outside. Instantly he was back in again, slamming the door and bolting it. "We got company," he announced to Johnny. "Grab a rifle!"

Johnny picked up Ferd Smith's carbine and stepped to the east window.

Flo crowded to his elbow and they looked out. Coming at a hard gallop, about a quarter mile away, were a dozen horsemen. Johnny recognized Rick Sherwood and Alf Sansone. Lagging back of them, riding awkwardly, came fat Syd Orme.

Chuck snapped a shell into his rifle chamber. He said hoarsely: "They can see a strawberry roan standin' outside. So they know Smith's in here. Reckon they followed him from the Circle D. They must be gunnin' for him, Johnny."

"They've come close enough," Johnny said. "Duck low, Flo." He smashed glass from the window and fired through it at the leading rider.

Instantly the entire band of them reined to a stop, one man slumping across his saddle horn and clutching at his mount's mane. The others scattered, some riding out of sight into the creek brush. Four of them veered out into the open pasture looking for cover there. Johnny fired again but his bullet didn't stop anyone.

"They're surrounding us," he reported. "Looks like the whole Circle D outfit plus Orme."

"Likely they think it was Ferdie took those two shots at 'em," Chuck said.

The creekward side of the cabin had a door and a window. The east and west walls each had a window. But the north wall had no opening at all. All walls were of heavy spruce logs.

"Get in a corner, Flo," Johnny ordered, "and lie on the floor."

But she wouldn't. She was a sheriff's daughter and she'd brought a saddle

rifle in here with hér. She took it to the creekside window and peered out there. As a bullet splashed glass splinters on her cheek she dodged low behind the logs.

The nearest of the creek cottonwoods were barely fifty yards away. From them came the shouting of Alf Sansone. "You ain't got a chance, Ferd. Toss your guns out."

"They still think," Johnny whispered, "that Smith's the only live man in here."

A minute later another yell came from the thickets. "Take a look, Alf. Here's three broncs. One of 'em's the big dun that Texas kid rides. Another's a Lazy M and another's a Bar L."

Johnny fired at the voice sound. He heard men scatter through the thickets. "Come and get us," he shouted.

No answer came. Ferd Smith still lay in irons on the floor. His eyes had panic.

"Gimme a gun," he pleaded, "and I'll help you stand 'em off."

"We can't trust you," Johnny said.

"Sure you can," the man begged. "It's me they're after, not you."

Johnny laughed coldly. "They're after anybody who knows the truth about 'em. Which includes all of us. Was Orme at the Circle D last night?"

"Not when I got there. They had to send to Chico for him."

Johnny looked at Chuck Wiggins. "Orme brought the money and they paid it to Smith. Smith took it and rode here to keep his part of the bargain. His own neck was at stake, too, if I was left alive. But they followed him close enough to keep him in sight."

"Why?" Chuck wondered.

"Two good reasons. To make sure he put a slug through me, and if he didn't, to do it themselves. Then they could shoot a few holes through Ferd Smith and take back the money they'd paid him."

Johnny looked at Flo, saw the pale horror on her face.

He said gently, "I wish you'd go huddle in a corner, Flo."

Volleys crashed from three directions. Rifle shots. They smashed the panes of three windows and riddled the door. Others drove with dull thuds into the log walls. One bullet pinged through the water bucket. Ferd Smith rolled out of line with the door and got to his feet. He stumbled toward a safe corner. The irons on his ankles tripped him and he sprawled prone there.

"Take these dang things off o' me," he screamed, "and gimme a gun."

"I'll give you a tap on the head," Wiggins promised, "if you don't shut up."

"Which way's the wind?" Johnny asked.

"It's blowin' downcrik, what there is of it," Chuck said.

Johnny grimaced. With an upcreek wind, there might be a faint chance of rifle fire being heard at the Rivera ranch house, six miles up the valley.

Johnny peered from the west window. He saw that two men had found cover behind a low sand dune in that direction. They lay prone and were firing over it.

A shot from the creekward window made Johnny turn. Flo had raised her head above the sill to take a shot at some target.

"Get down," Johnny said desperately. He dragged her below the sill level just as bullets streamed through.

Again came Sansone's voice from the cottonwoods. "Come outa there, McBride. And bring that woman of

yours. We won't bother you any. All we want's Ferd Smith. We're after him for gunnin' Johnny Diamond."

Ferd Smith himself yelled back, "You're a liar by the clock. You paid me to gun Johnny Diamond."

"Why would they think Slim McBride's in here?" Flo puzzled.

"It's *his* cabin," Johnny reasoned. "He'd be riding a Lazy M horse like they found out there. And they saw your hair above the sill. They figure if a woman's in here, she must be Mrs. Slim McBride."

Wiggins fired two quick shots from the east window. A yell in that direction meant a hit.

Then a puzzled voice came from the trees. "Slim McBride ain't got red hair, has he, Alf? Must be someone else."

"Come out," Sansone shouted, "or we'll smoke you out!"

The threat brought a crease of worry to Johnny's brow. He looked with a sense of helplessness at the windowless north wall of the cabin. Nothing to keep them from setting fire to the cabin.

Two of the logs there didn't fit snugly at one end. A crack between them had been chinked solidly with adobe plaster. Johnny found a butcher knife on a shelf.

"I can't trust you with a gun," he said to Ferd Smith, "but you can have this." He tossed the knife to Smith and took the handcuffs from his wrists. "Get busy. We need a loophole on that side." He pointed to the north wall.

Ferd Smith, his ankles still hobbled, crawled over there. He set to work gouging at the adobe chinking between two logs.

An ominous silence came from the besiegers. Johnny moved from window to window but caught no glimpse of them. "They're up to something," he said, and had a fairly good idea of what it was.

By the short shadows outside, it was now close to noon. Daylight, he thought, was on their side. But darkness wouldn't be. It would shield an attack. He looked at Flo and felt a pinch at his heart.

No sound at all came except the steady clicks of a knife with which Ferd Smith was digging away plaster from between two logs.

"It comes out easy," he reported.

Johnny looked from the creekside window. The strawberry roan, frightened by shots, had shied away dragging the bridle reins. He was now grazing a few hundred yards up the valley.

Minutes more slipped by without any sign or sound of the enemy.

Smith's knife punched through to daylight. He scraped away chinking until he had a crack six inches wide and half as high. He was on his knees there, and Johnny saw him peer out through the hole.

"They're comin'," the man announced hoarsely. "Gimme a gun and I'll blast 'em."

Johnny pushed him aside and looked out the new loophole himself. Two cowboys were advancing stealthily toward the cabin. Each had an armful of dry sagebrush. Johnny poked the barrel of a forty-five through the hole and fired five times.

For a moment smoke clogged the hole and kept him from seeing out. When he did, he saw that one man lay motionless on the ground. The other had dropped his armload of firewood and was legging it away.

"I guess they won't try that again," Johnny said. "Not in daylight, anyway."

He turned and saw Flo looking at his bootless feet. "We should have left it on the road," she said in dismay. "I mean the one Chuck and I picked up."

Wiggins agreed wryly. "It's tied to my saddle. And Flo's dead right. If I'd had sense enough to leave it in the road, somebody else might see it and get the same steer we did."

"Where's the other one?" Johnny asked Ferd Smith.

"Left it at the Circle D," the man said. He seemed eager to co-operate now, no doubt hoping for leniency if they escaped this trap. If they didn't, he would certainly be shot down by Sansone and Sherwood and Orme.

The ruse of setting fire to the cabin having failed, again volleys came from all sides. Bullets splintered the door and the bolt fell off.

"Duck," Johnny cautioned. "And get ready for a rush."

No rush came. They'd know, Johnny reasoned, that a rush would be costly. At least the first three or four men who came charging them could be picked off.

Johnny peered out and saw a man aiming over a sand dune. But the hatted head went out of sight before Johnny could fire. Something stung his cheek and he felt blood there. A bullet had creased him just under the ear.

"Please keep down," Flo begged him. She was at his side. "I wish you'd stayed in Texas, Johnny."

She'd said that, he remembered, once before. But in a different tone; the one she used now was like a caress.

"If I ever go back there," he said in a choked voice, "I want to take you with me."

Wiggins was cutting loose from the opposite window. "Got one," the redhead reported. "That makes three down and maybe nine to go. How's the ammunition, pal?"

An inventory showed only about thirty more rifle rounds and even less for forty-fives. "We better save it for the showdown," Chuck said.

Ferd Smith, unarmed, was posted to watch out through the north-wall portal hole. Chuck and Johnny took turns at the windows. Twice in the next hour Alf Sansone shouted a challenge, inviting surrender.

Johnny yelled back, "Sherwood lets you do all the talking, Alf. What's the matter? Does he think Flo doesn't know he's out there?"

Silence from Sherwood. "We'll pay you a call, come nighttime," Sansone promised.

The afternoon shadows lengthened. Only an occasional shot came whirring in at the shattered windows. They'd wait till dark and then creep up for the kill. As the hours dragged by, hope steadily faded.

"We'll be two against nine," Johnny muttered.

"*Three* against nine," Flo corrected. She still had a loaded carbine.

"Four," Ferd Smith argued, "if you'll gimme a gun."

Johnny talked it over with Chuck. With a gun, the man might fight for them or against them.

"If they win," Smith argued, "I'm a dead pigeon. If you win, I get a fair trial in court. Slip me a gun."

"I'll think about it," Johnny brooded. "What time you got, Chuck?"

Wiggins looked at his watch. "'Bout two hours till nightfall, Johnny."

Johnny looked wretchedly at Flo. She came to him and wiped a smear of blood from his cheek. There was nothing he could say to her.

Chapter Nineteen

The Roundup Is Over

SIX miles up Grosella Creek, an old wooden bridge crossed just below the hacienda gate. Sheriff Adam Sawyer trotted his big bay over that bridge, having ridden leisurely out from town.

He saw a rider approaching from the opposite direction. Recognizing Buck Perry, Sawyer waited.

Perry cantered up to him. "Hi, Sheriff. Ain't seen anything of a redheaded puncher of mine named Wiggins, have you?"

"I didn't meet him on the road, Buck."

"He was supposed to bust a colt for me this mornin' but he didn't show up. Came over here sparkin' last night, the boys tell me. Can't figure out why he didn't come home."

"That boy from Texas was here too, last night," Sawyer said. "Must be still; I couldn't locate him in town today anywhere."

"Howcome you're lookin' for him, Ad? Anything new?"

"Two things. I thought he ought to know about 'em. I want to see if he's got any more smart ideas."

"What two things?"

"They found Val Cranston in a ditch up near Huerfano. Shot full of rifle slugs. Other matter concerns Winnie Quinn. She wouldn't leave her jail cell when I offered to set her free. Not till an agent sold her beer joint and brought her the cash. Then she demanded a police escort to the depot. This morning she boarded a train for California. Which scores two good guesses for Johnny Diamond."

Perry gaped. "Whadda yuh know?"

"Felicia and Flo ought to know where those boys are," Sawyer said. "Let's go in and see 'em."

They rode through the gate and up the ranch street to the main house. Felicia admitted them there.

"Hello, Uncle Adam. How are you, Mr. Perry?" To her uncle she added, "Flo told you, I suppose."

"Told me about what?"

"About Johnny Diamond not arriving for dinner last night. Flo was so worried she got up at daylight and rode to town."

Alarm tightened Sawyer's face. "Flo rode to town? Then why didn't she go home? Or to my office? I didn't see her anywhere. I thought she was still here."

"Nothing could have happened to her," Felicia said quickly. "She was with Chuck Wiggins. They rode in together."

The sheriff stared. "But I didn't see Chuck either."

A Mexican maid entered with a tray. On it were three cups of wine. Dolores Valdez had already been trained in the amenities of a hacienda. When fatigued guests arrived after a long ride, they must be served at once with a cup of wine.

But alarm had caught both mistress and guests now, and they paid no attention to Dolores. She stood timidly by, holding the tray.

"Hell!" exclaimed Buck Perry. "Looks like they rid into trouble somewhere. That Texas boy not showin' up last night! Then Flo an' Chuck headin' out to look fer him and—"

Sawyer's face turned suddenly gray. Not long ago Johnny Diamond had been sniped at on that same road. The

sniper might have tried again. If Flo and Chuck had found Johnny's body by the road, what would they have done?

His eyes put the question to Perry and the rancher had a prompt answer. "Chuck'd try trackin' the killer, Ad. And Flo might tag along. You an' me better hit the saddle."

"Send Miguel in here, Felicia," Sawyer said. When the old *mayor domo* appeared he snapped brisk orders. "Rout out every vaquero on the place, Miguel. Rifles and six-guns."

Miguel left excitedly for the bunkhouse.

"I'm with you, Ad," Buck Perry said grimly. "But where do we ride and who the hell do we look for?"

"We'll comb every cave in the rimrocks," Sawyer said. "We'll ride the mesas from end to end looking for Ferd Smith. He tried it before. If anyone drygulched Johnny, it was Ferd Smith."

"All I know about that guy," Perry put in, "is he's a no-good gunnie forkin' a strawberry roan."

Dolores Valdez, standing unobtrusively by with her tray of wine cups, caught the last word. Strawberry roan!

"I have seen a horse of such color, señor." She offered the information shyly, speaking Spanish. Her knowledge of English was scant, but she understood that it concerned her benefactor, Johnny Diamond.

Sawyer whirled toward her. "You saw a strawberry roan? Where?"

"It is yesterday morning, señor. I know that Señor Diamond comes for *comida* and so I must make for him a pie of the wild currants. Many are growing along the *rio*. So I ride a burro far down the pasture. To pick the *grosellas*, señor. It is there that I see this strawberry roan. He has a saddle on. He is tied by a cabin of logs."

They stared at her. "But how could that be?" exclaimed Felicia. "The only cabin down the creek belongs to Slim McBride."

"And Slim," Perry broke in, slapping his thigh, "is in Denver for a week. Ferd Smith could know it and feel safe to hole up there."

Adam Sawyer unbuttoned his long black coat, exposing a gunbelt and a forty-five. Miguel appeared to announce, "The vaqueros are ready, señor."

Sawyer and Perry strode out to their horses. Dusk had settled over the ranch yard and in the gloom they could see ten Mexican stock hands, all mounted, each with a carbine in his scabbard. "You come along too, Miguel," the sheriff said. "And bring a lantern. It'll be pitch-dark time we get there." He swung to his saddle and stirrup to stirrup with Buck Perry, he galloped out through the gate.

With cheers the vaqueros streamed after them. Word had been whispered that a *prima* of their mistress might need to be rescued. "*Adelante, compañeros!*"

LIGHT HAD FADED outside the cabin. Johnny crouched where he could cover the door and the creekward window. Chuck and Flo, each with a carbine, faced the side windows. Ferd Smith had a knife and the use of his hands. His ankles were still linked together. He kept begging for a gun.

"They'll kill me," he whined, "like a rat in a trap."

"Which is what you are," Johnny said.

A cloudy sky meant there'd be no moon. Pitch blackness was closing in.

"Their best chance," Johnny said, "is to sneak up from the north side. Put your ear to that chink you gouged out, Smith."

Ferd Smith groped to the crack in the north wall. Another ten minutes slipped by. It was completely dark now.

"I hear 'em comin'," Smith warned. "Gimme somethin' to blast 'em with."

Johnny went to the crack. Though he could see nothing but black night, he heard the sound of a crawling man, barely ten yards away, and fired his six-gun through the hole.

Answering shots came from every direction. By now the panels of the door had been entirely shot away.

"Let's get out of here," Johnny said. "If we can't see them in the dark, they can't see us either."

The prospect terrified Flo. The idea didn't appeal to Wiggins either. But to Johnny it seemed the only chance. "Look. They'll swarm us under, if we stay here. I'll go first. Wait one minute, Flo, then you come after me. Chuck, you come one minute after Flo. She'll be between us. In the dark they won't see us. Crawl to the brush, Flo. Then get up and run."

Before they could protest Johnny opened what was left of the door. It showed only a black rectangle of night. He stepped quickly out and to one side, dropped flat and wriggled toward the creek trees.

A flash to his left showed a man snaking his way through grass to the cabin. Johnny fired his forty-five and made a hit. He heard a yelp from the man. Others must have seen the flash of Johnny's shot, but since it came from outside they'd think it was one of their own men.

Johnny crawled on to the edge of the trees. A voice near by whispered, "Where's Alf?" It sounded like Syd Orme. Johnny groped toward the voice, his carbine punched out before him. When the barrel collided with flesh he pulled the trigger.

A mountain of man fell against him as Syd Orme went down without even a groan.

A step behind him made Johnny turn, swinging up the rifle. Flo came sobbing into his arms.

"Run," Johnny whispered. "Keep in the brush and run like hell." Whatever she answered was smothered in a burst of yells and shots. The raiders were charging the cabin.

"Listen," Flo whispered. "They're running away! Don't you hear them, Johnny?"

Johnny became aware, then, of hoof-beats. A thunder of them. Not away from the cabin, but toward it.

The sound confused Johnny. Surely the Circle D's wouldn't charge that cabin on horseback.

"Flo! Johnny! Are you in there?" A voice rang from the night.

"It's Dad!" Flo cried. "Here I am, Dad."

"*Adelante, compañeros!*" This in a chorus from charging vaqueros.

Johnny felt his knees go weak. Relief sapped him. Gunshots cracked on his right and his left, from the ground, from saddles, from the cabin. "Here I am!" Flo cried again.

"You all right, Chuck?" This time the voice was Buck Perry's. There came a chatter in Spanish from Bar L vaqueros. One saddle had a lantern. The shapes of horsemen loomed in the dark.

Chuck Wiggins appeared at the cabin door with a lighted candle. He'd stayed there to draw fire and cover

Flo's retreat. "How many got away, Boss?"

"Not many," Perry told him. "We rid up just as they was smashin' in on yuh."

The candlelight exposed figures sprawled grotesquely near the cabin door. Most of them had stopped moving. One of them was Rick Sherwood. Another was Alf Sansone. Adam Sawyer turned to Johnny Diamond.

"Looks like the roundup's over, young man."

"All but roundin' up my boots," Johnny said. He stood there in his sock feet, fight-weary, with an arm around Flo.

"I'll round up the boots," Sawyer promised. "You take Flo to the ranch house. Might be some of that currant pie left up there."

WHEN THE REAL ROUNDUP was over, late in October, and the calves branded, and the Lazy M beef sorted from the Bar L, and the Circle D stuff driven away to the auction of a felon's estate, a great feast was celebrated at the hacienda of Don Ronaldo Rivera.

The ranch yard was full. Peons from all over the county were there. Gringos were there too, ranchers and cowboys. Merchants from Las Perdidas were there with their wives and children. Servants scurried about.

Most of the crowd gathered at the small adobe church. From it came a chime of bells. Candles mellowed the arches of its windows.

Inside, a priest waited at the altar. The groom stood near the priest, his face flushed and expectant. The young gringo with red hair, stood at the groom's elbow.

The organ broke into the march. The bride moved glowingly down the aisle on the arm of Señor the Sheriff. Felicia Rivera, maid of honor, followed them.

Soon the crowd came surging out of the church. Again it overflowed the ranch yard. While they waited for the bride to change her dress, there were songs and toasts to her health and happiness. At last Johnny Diamond lifted his wife to the seat of a buckboard.

A big dun horse was tied to its endgate. He followed as Johnny Diamond drove away. Hundreds waved them good-by.

"That was a mighty generous wedding gift you gave Flo, Ronaldo."

"*De nada!*" deprecated the senator. "At the auction sale the Circle D went for a mere pittance."

"But aren't you afraid," fretted Adam Sawyer, "that it will depress them? After it's been a nest of thieves all these years?"

"They are young and brave; they will find happiness there." The senator sucked with mellow contentment at his *cigaritta*. "It is the way we have built this land, *cuñado mio*. Always the good must follow evil, to replace it with peace and love."

The buckboard faded, melting into the grama distance, down the San Ysidro road.

THE END

A WESTERN ACROSTIC

By M. L. REAVES

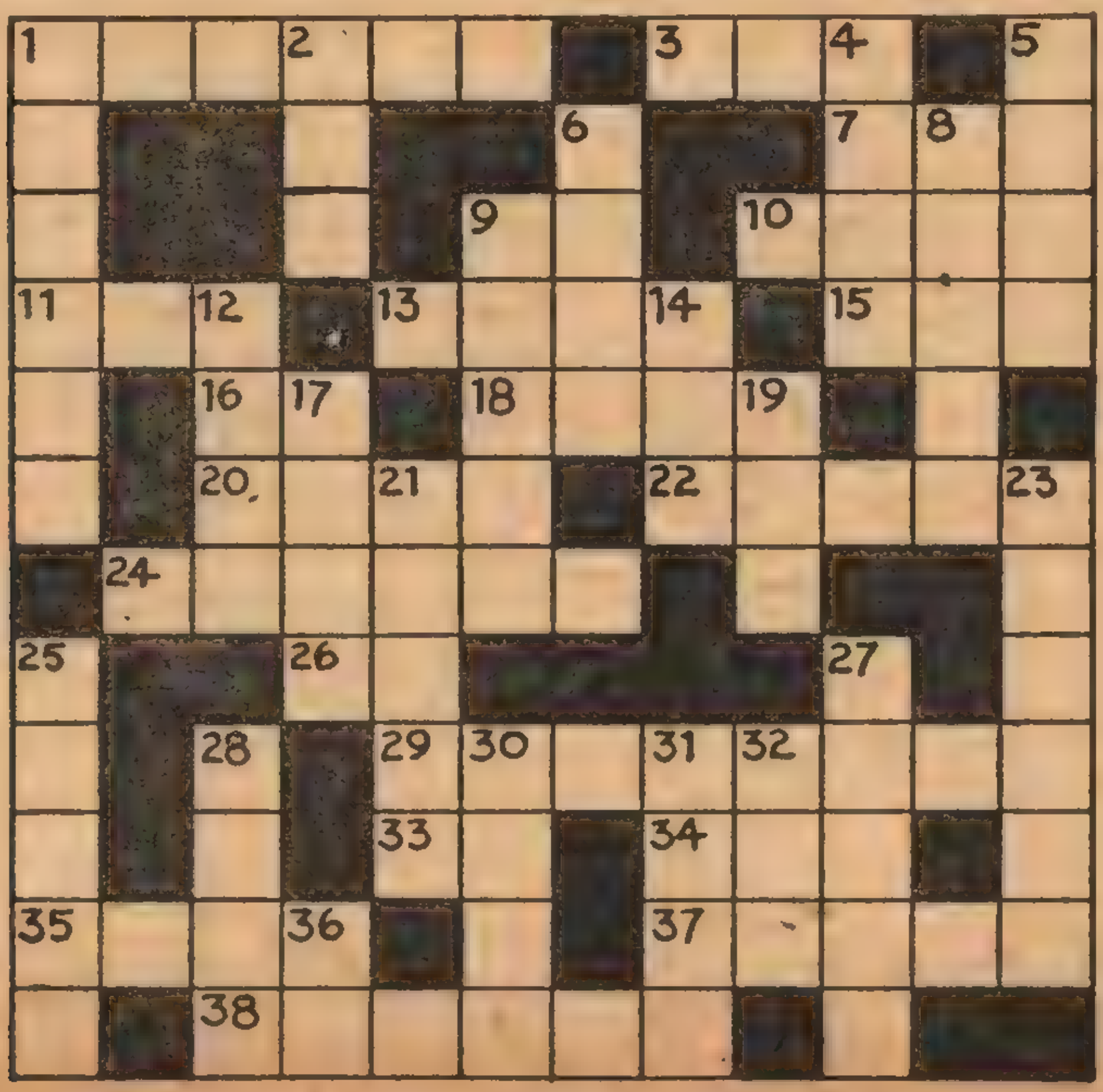
Solution on page 158

Across:

1. A cowboy's prized possession
2. Female bovine
7. O. B. Hill's brand (fictitious)
9. B. Atkin's brand (fict.)
10. Bull (Spanish)
11. Cowboy's saddle
13. Wire that caused many range wars
15. Moo
16. I. Hassiter's brand (fict.)
18. What's slung in a gun fight
20. Cowboy's bed and belongings
22. Southwestern flower
24. Lost cattle
26. N. Slater's brand (fict.)
29. Large Mexican-style hat
33. All right
34. What shows between a bronc and a tenderfoot rider
35. Cow's progeny
37. Exhibition of cowboy skill
38. What rustlers were often hanged without benefit of

Down:

1. Horse's color
2. A sheepherder's prized possession
4. Product from sheep
5. Cowboy food
6. Female horse
8. Unbroken horse
9. Expletive used by remittance man
12. To tighten the saddle
14. Horse's color
17. Business end of saddle
19. Horse's color
21. Cowboy's rope
23. Deep, dry gully
25. Stockman's land and animals
27. Large groups of cattle
28. Young horse
30. Stock-raising state (abbr.)
31. Where most cowboys spend their time on payday
32. River (Spanish)
36. F. Rankin's brand (fict.)



ROUGH on RATTLERS

By

S. OMAR BARKER

A ZGWM Special Feature

I ONCE WROTE a poem called "Code of the Cow Country," in which appeared the few unbreakable rules of a true cowboy's day-to-day conduct. Among them was "Always kill a rattlesnake." It is a good rangeland custom, and man is by no means the only cow-country "critter" to follow it. Feared as old Crotalus Atrox (Texas Diamond-back) is, there are more animals than you might think that can destroy him—and often do.

See that flock of wild turkeys yonder under that big live-oak tree? Notice how excited those five or six gobblers seem to be? Watch them hold that circle as they take rapid turns at high jumping! Hear that whipcrack as the jumper's wing flashes out like a scythe every time he comes down! Busier than the front-row fiddler at a forty-dollar fandango! And the job they are doing is one that entitles them to rank as good citizens of the wilderness, for what those turkey toms are so intent upon is the grim business of destroying a full-grown rattlesnake. Nice work—if you can't get out of it!

The stiff overlap of their outer feathers is a pretty fair armor for some parts of their bodies if Mr. Crotalus does happen to get in a lick, but their legs and under parts are only fuzz-feathered against poison fangs. Believe it or not, it is pure quickness that saves them. If the rattler has already coiled, the first turkey to tackle him runs a considerable risk of being bitten, for the coiled rattlesnake's strike is akin to lightning; but once he has lost the stance of his coil, the swift teamwork of a few gobblers is too much for him.

There is enough power in a wild turkey's wing to break a man's nose, and as each tom leaps, he strikes downward with a swift flash of hard-feathered wing tip, frustrating whatever effort the rattler may be making to reassume a striking position.

Sometimes the gobblers miss, sometimes they strike also with tough, scaley feet, but almost never do they fail to leap in and out swiftly enough to escape the rattler's fangs. After a while, as this methodical thumping beats the snake down, some bold turk of the slaughter circle will sink a sharp beak into his belly and soon it is all over for Mr. Crotalus. Strong, ripping beaks literally pick him to pieces.

Usually, up to this point the hens have kept out of the ruckus, but now they join the feast—and rattler meat seems to digest very well in a wild

turkey's gizzard.

Deer, also, can be rough on rattlers caught without sufficient foliage or other cover to protect them. These timid, soft-eyed creatures, whether white-tail or mule deer, buck or doe, seem to have their own instinctive code of bravery. Observant cowboys and other outdoorsmen will tell you that deer rarely pass up the chance to attack a rattlesnake in their path if it is out in plain sight.

For them, however, it is likely to be a one-man—or rather a one-deer—job. Sometimes, of course, deer get bitten. Specimens have been taken in the southwest with snake-bite swellings on their legs or under parts, but not about the head; for even the antlered buck fights his smaller enemies with his feet.

Springing with unbelievable swiftness from a distance out of snake-striking range, the deer slashes sharply downward with his hard, knifelike hoofs and leaps away again. If Mr. Crotalus Atrox doesn't grab his chance and slide away to the safety of rocks or bushes, he soon finds himself cut to shreds. Though turkeys and other rattlesnake enemies may conceivably destroy for food, the deer is obviously rough on rattlers purely from a self-protective, instinctive enmity.

Most animals, whether they have ever seen a snake before or not, will display this instinct, as often by fear as by fight. Any cowboy can tell you of the times his bronc has "spooked" at a rattler and bucked his rider off in the first moment of fright. Only a few instances have been known, however, when a horse has actually attacked a snake and tromped it with his front hoofs. This is much more likely to happen in the case of a wild-born, range-raised mustang. I've also heard old-time packers say that a *macho* mule is mean-tempered enough to challenge a sidewinder and give him first bite.

Nowhere is dog bravery given a finer showing than in fighting a snake. As far as I can observe, snakes are snakes to a dog. He doesn't know a rattler from the harmless kind—but it doesn't matter: he's afraid of it, anyhow. Yet in spite of obvious fear, I have seen dogs of almost every mongrel mixture tackle a snake and do pretty destructive business with it. Instinct gives them the right method, which is to leap in swiftly from behind, seize the snake, give it a swift and terrific shaking, drop it and leap away. Maybe I should say "throw it" instead of "drop it," for I've seen dogs fling a snake a dozen yards. Plainly it is a fight no dog enjoys, but destroying a snake seems to be part of the canine as well as the cowboy code.

Coyotes sometimes kill rattlers in a similar manner, but unless Don Coyote is pretty hungry or just feeling "salty," he is more likely to go trotting off sidewise when he hears the warning buzz.

House cats, too, have been known to bring young rattlesnakes home for their kittens to eat, and I have heard many a long-time resident of rattler country say that he never heard of a cat being bitten. You can also take the word of homesteaders that chickens sometimes kill small snakes, including rattlers, and eat them. Mistake them for oversize worms, no doubt!

The *javelina*, peccary, or wild pig of southwest Texas is another deadly enemy of the diamondback. Though not a true swine, the *javelina's* hide is tough and underlaid with a fatty gristle carrying almost no blood vessels. Thus even when a fang strikes in, the poison is not carried quickly into the

blood stream. With this advantage a hungry *javelina* can make short work of a rattlesnake.

Domestic swine are also great snake killers. "He didn't have any more chance than a snake in a hogpen" is a familiar saying among cowboys.

There was a demonstration in Roswell, New Mexico, a few years ago which boosted the rating of the lowly badger considerably. Among cowfolks this dumpy citizen has generally been looked upon mostly as a nuisance because of his habit of digging holes in the landscape without putting up a danger sign. One of the commonest causes of crippled-up cowboys is the badger hole into which a galloping pony "throwed a foot."

But to get back to Roswell: this badger occupied the middle room of a three-apartment box. Beyond a thin board partition on one side were rabbits, on the other side a rattlesnake. The badger gnawed through to the snake and ate it! The old Romans had some words for it: *de gustibus non est disputandum*—or in plain cowboyese: "every tick to his own taste!"

Plenty of old-timers will tell you that the roadrunner or chaparral bird, which the Mexicans call *el paisano*, is the rattlesnake's Public Enemy No. 1. Some naturalists claim that it isn't so. Though they admit that *el paisano* has been known to eat snakes when the supply of lizards, beetles, centipedes, tarantulas, and such delicacies runs short, they aver that the story about roadrunners building cactus corrals around rattlesnakes is just another western "big windy."

Yet I have heard old cowmen say they have *seen* this remarkable performance, in which the snake, pricked by the cactus every time he launches a strike at the tantalizing bird, becomes so enraged and befuddled that he bites himself and dies from his own poison. This I have never seen myself, but who am I to doubt the word of a cowman?

However he does it, *el paisano* does kill rattlesnakes and eat them, sometimes swallowing small ones whole. This long-tailed bird is "one planty tough jeeger," as the Mexicans say. He may measure two feet in length, including a foot of tail, and has a stout, horny beak two inches long, two toes forward and two backward at the end of a pair of skinny-shinned legs that can well nigh outrun a horse. His topknot looks as warlike as an Apache on the prowl, over a keen and fearless-looking eye, and he is supposed to be a kinsman of the cuckoo family that "took out to the wild bunch while still an egg." So, as far I'm concerned, even if he doesn't build cactus fences around rattlesnakes, I'll bet he could!

According to legend, Pecos Bill is the only cowboy who never beat a rattlesnake to death with his rope. This mythical hero of the long-ago cow country is said to have taken six diamondbacks alive and held their heads in his teeth while he braided them into living—and moderately musical—hatbands!

However that may be, there are several men roaming the west nowadays who never kill a rattler. They capture them alive to sell to zoos and to laboratories where anti-venom serum is made from the poison sacs in their jaws.

One of these is Ed Mowery, of Clovis, N. M. Ed snares Mr. Crotalus Atrox with a rawhide jerk loop at the far end of a seven- or eight-foot pole—and has never been bitten. His stories of snake-snaring are not as hair-raising as you might expect. The last time I heard of him he was more concerned

about the price of the "pizen rep-tiles" than about the peril of poison fangs.

"A rattler," says Ed, "is more scared of you than you are of him."

Whether he knows it or not, I am not the "you" he's talking about. Whenever I hear that menacing buzz of rattles, I remove my person quickly to a safe distance, then thank the Lord for a gun with which to be rough on rattlers instead of having to trample them to death as do the timid (?) deer, or whack them down with my good stout wing, like an old tom turkey!

COWPOKE GAB HABITS

By C. WILES HALLOCK

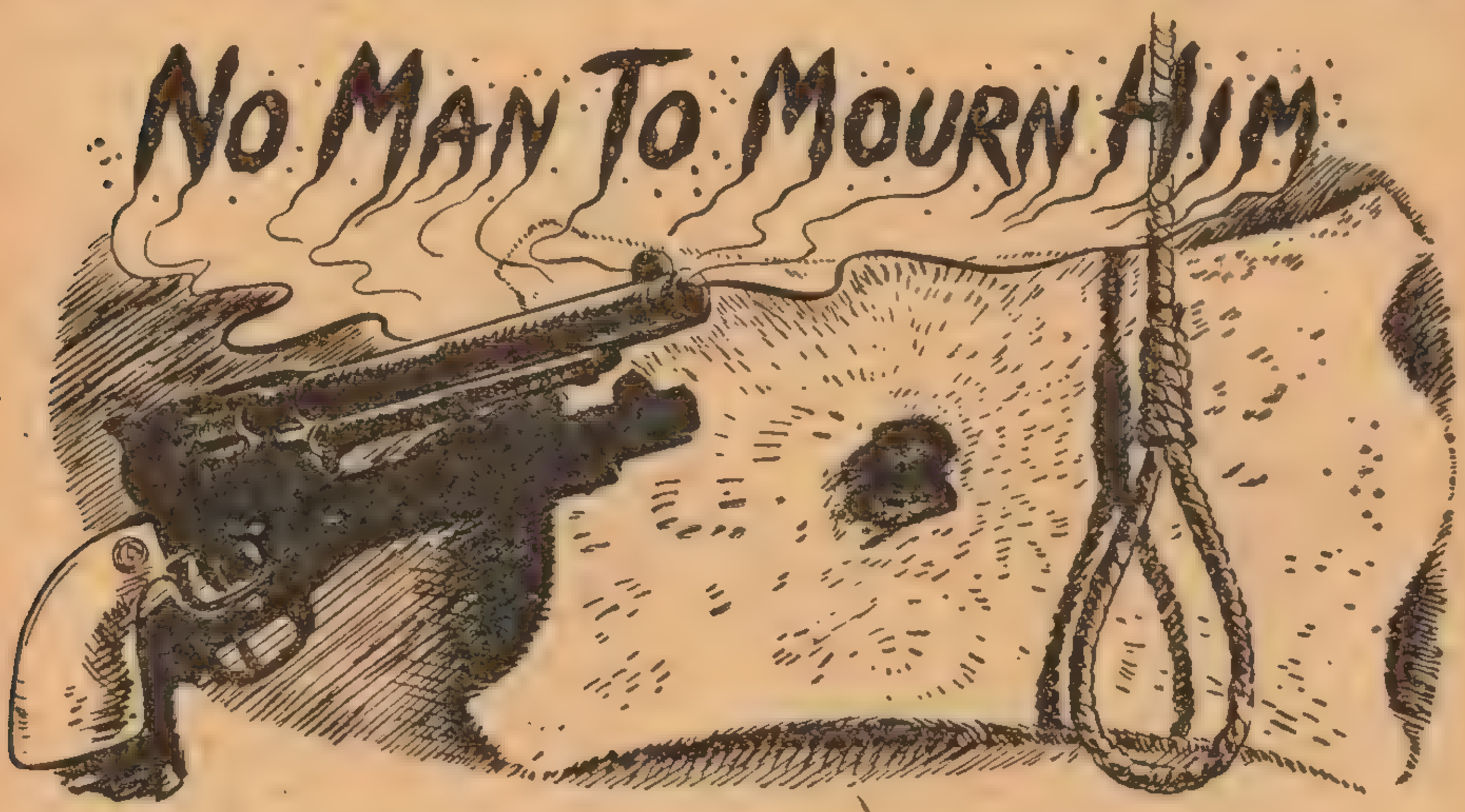
TALKIN' patient to the dogies—speakin' gentle to the colts—
Givin' soft, unfretful orders to yore hoss—
Bein' everlastin' breezy—meetin' strangers free and easy—
Aimin' mild and civil langwidge at the boss—
Gabbin' mannerly with buddies, whether sensible or dolts—
Countin' ten before you answer words of wrath—
Such engagin' ways of doin' rough-and-tumble buckarooin'
Is okay—till woe in steer hide blocks yore path!

Words of captivatin' kindness spoken peaceful and polite
To a demon-natured steer with grim ambition
Has about as much effect on his heart and intellect
As a snowslide down the chasms of Perdition!
Wranglin' wild, new-leathered broncos 'bout as safe as dynamite—
Tracin' stray-trails via canyon, peak, and prairie—
Makes some waddies utter phrases when their 'zasperation blazes
Never found in any *prude's* vocabulary!

Solemn, seldom-speakin' hombres in the buckarooin' game
Got more gumption than the constant-jawin' kind;
Thinkin' up fierce eppythets for demeanin' quadrupets
Don't make critters any easier to mind.
Treatin' little dogies gentle should be ev'ry cowpoke's aim;
Don't cuss bosses—neither hosses which you ride;
But describin' sudden snow-blows, gilas, rattlesnakes, or loboes
Takes the luridest tiradin' ever tried!

Big Jesse has an ace in the hole—but will it top the Sheriff's hangnoose trump?

NO MAN TO MOURN HIM



By KENNETH FOWLER

BIG JESSE MacFARLAND, alias Fox MacFarland, alias, a good many years before, the Sonora Kid, had an ace in the hole, and, until just this morning, he'd had a feeling he might beat the noose Deputy Sheriff Barney O'Toole had ready to tighten around his slippery neck. But doubt was beginning to gnaw at him. Now, as he stared out through the barred jailhouse window to where the Pawnee County gallows reared its ugly framework to the sky, he began to wonder whether he might not soon be taking his last look at that far gray sky line.

It was a good color for his thoughts, gray, a color that matched the dark mood of depression that was upon him, and seemed to reflect the cold grayness of his cell walls and the raw November grayness of the day itself. Gray, reflected Big Jesse MacFarland, was a death color, almost as much as black.

He was conscious of a sudden caved-in feeling at the pit of his stomach as he stepped down from the chair he had been standing on to see out through the window and went back to his bunk. The bunk was made out of solid hickory and had no give to it. Even with two blankets under him, after a man had lain on it awhile he felt like he'd just ridden up a trail on three joints of his backbone.

Big Jesse took makings out of his shirt pocket. His right forefinger tapped the string end of the little sack of Bull, sifting exactly the right amount of tobacco into the rice paper. But when he started building the cigarette he noticed there was a slight trembling in his hands, and when he tried to control it, he found he could not.

That fool mick, O'Toole! Big Jesse thought. Acting like the grass was already waving over him. One of those

damned sour-puss Irishmen who never cracked a smile. Gave you the feeling he was trying to get under your hide, whether he was or not. But it was only the sheriff who had the authority to hang a man, and the sheriff had been out with a posse, hunting Lew Gallagher. He would be back today, O'Toole had told him yesterday. And then, with or without Lew Gallagher to keep him company, O'Toole had grimly promised, Big Jesse would click his heels from a rope's end, and God have mercy.

Big Jesse lighted the cigarette and took a deep drag on it. Maybe—it was a possibility, now, that he could no longer ignore—his ace in the hole would merely turn out to be a joker. A man in a tight like he was now would build a hope on almost anything, quicksand even. And the sheriff certainly must have returned by now. All he had asked O'Toole to do was just mention that name, the Sonora Kid, to the sheriff, and ask him if he remembered a kid named Red. The deputy had shown no surprise at the odd request; poker-faced, he had simply nodded and promised he'd take care of it. But now it didn't look like O'Toole could have done it yet—or, if he had, Big Jesse had sure played his last high card. Because, a little while ago, O'Toole had brought a sky pilot to the door of his cell.

"You must repent and make peace with your Maker, Jesse MacFarland. I will read to you from the Twenty-Third Psalm, and then we will bow our heads in prayer. We will walk humbly together in sight of the Lord."

"I never had no peace and I ain't prayin' for none now," Big Jesse had told him harshly. "Now you git to hell outa here and leave me be."

The old fool! Thinkin' he could pass a man on up to the Pearly Gates just by readin' to him out of that Book! A man got his ticket the day he was born, and his had been boughten for the other place and to hell with ary humble walkin' now.

Big Jesse scowled down at the cigarette burning out between his fingers. Some way, contrary to his own oft-spoken prediction, he'd never quite pictured this kind of an end for himself. Dying quick, maybe, with a slug in his belly, but not like this. Waiting for it, helpless, with no way to fight back. Maybe he'd been loco, to figure the sheriff might—

The cell door rattled, and looking up, Big Jesse saw the ruddy Irish face of Barney O'Toole framed between two bars. It was O'Toole, heading that first posse of angry cattlemen, who had caught him. Lew Gallagher had gotten away, and his other partner, Johnny Duschness, had been shot dead. He stared up into O'Toole's dead-pan face and felt an abrupt sinking sensation within him.

"Shame, man," O'Toole said, "to turn your face from the holiness of that gentleman of the cloth."

"To hell with that!" snarled Big Jesse. "What about the sheriff? You tell him what I said?"

"I did that."

Big Jesse strained forward on the bunk. "Well, wha'd he say?"

"He said, 'Tell him this, Barney. Tell him I'd always hoped he'd get it by a bullet instead of a rope.'" O'Toole paused, then added grudgingly, "If you did have to get it, he said."

Big Jesse lunged abruptly to his feet. "All right, then, you tell him this for me. Tell him Big Jesse MacFarland never asked odds of ary damned law-dog! Tell him I'll spit on the knot and

tie it for him!"

Solemnly, Barney O'Toole shook his head. "Man, man," he sighed. "Have ye never spoken a decent word or done one clean, prideful thing in your life?"

Big Jesse strode forward and cramped his fingers around the steel bars of the door. His face contorted in a savage grimace as he stared into O'Toole's Irish-blue eyes.

"Yeah," he spat out. "I lied to a kid who trusted me. I cheated him and whupped him and then flagged him to hell out of the country."

"God have pity on you," O'Toole said. And then, as he wheeled around and started away, a bellow of hoarse crazy laughter echoed down the corridor after him.

BIG JESSE didn't spit on the knot. His throat was too dry when they finally marched him from the cell and led him out to the scaffold. He was determined to die tough and he would have liked that as a last contemptuous gesture, but when the time came his parched mouth had no saliva in it.

Anyway, there wasn't much time for gestures. Another deputy stood guard over him while O'Toole was up on the scaffold, making a quick last-minute inspection of his gear. Then the sheriff walked over to him. The sheriff was a tall, sparely built man, with a face that looked aged before its time.

He hesitated an instant before he spoke. "Shake hands, Jesse?"

Big Jesse looked him in the eyes. "I reckon. Hell, yes," he growled, and thrust out a gnarled hand.

"If you've got any kinfolk, Jesse, or there's any friend you'd like to have noti—"

"I got nobody, Sheriff. Except that kid, Red. You remember—rode for Gus Menefee's outfit, down in the Panhandle?"

"I remember the one."

"You cut his sign ary time, tell him I reckon it's a right smart of a job I done on him. Say—say I'm proud he remembered and stuck by the rules. He'll savvy the message."

"I'll see he's told, Jesse."

"And here." Big Jesse fumbled in a pocket of his jeans. "Give him this. A watch ain't arything I'll need, where I'm goin'."

He wheeled abruptly, conscious of a kind of whirly feeling in his head as O'Toole and the other deputy now flanked him and led him up onto the platform. There, as O'Toole brought out a bandanna for his eyes, Big Jesse snarled, "Keep that to honk your nose with!" and when O'Toole looked down questioningly at the sheriff, the sheriff motioned him to put it away.

Then the sheriff held up his hand and quickly turned away and there was a heavy thudding sound as O'Toole sprang the trap.

IN THOSE DAYS, Big Jesse had been a fast hand with a running iron, and he and a partner who went by the name of Indian Charlie had been doing a good business in blotting brands until a crew of Hashknife punchers rode up on Jesse one morning and caught him redhanded sleepering a bunch of calves. Indian Charlie had been lucky; he had been away, working another section of range, but later luck had run to Big Jesse, too.

The Hashknife men had taken him back to their roundup camp, where there had been talk of lynching until the crew foreman, Bullhide Jenks, had

cut it short. Jenks had sent out a rider to fetch in Gus Menefee, the owner, but Menefee had never gotten back there in time. For, late that night, the kid wrangler with the outfit, a red-headed button named Danny Laidlaw, had cut Big Jesse loose and ridden away with him. Red, as the other hands all called him, had made that a stipulation. Either they both sashayed out of there, pardners, like, or Big Jesse could stay where he was, hog-tied, and wait for Gus Menefee to decide his fate.

Danny Laidlaw hadn't been any more than sixteen, seventeen, then, and the Hashknife had been a hard-driving outfit. Nobody could ride for it with one foot in the stirrup, and Danny was fed up with the grind. He honed to be a sky-line rider, like Big Jesse, to come and go as he pleased, and maybe some day build him up a rep like Jesse's, as the Sonora Kid. How did "the Hashknife Kid" sound to Big Jesse?

Big Jesse said it sounded real prime, but when they were a safe hour's ride from the camp and it was certain they had slipped away unnoticed, he signaled Danny Laidlaw to a halt and they reined up in the shadows of a cottonwood motte. Then, because he kind of cottoned to this kid who hankered to be a curly wolf, and visioned how it might have been for him if someone had slapped him down at that age, before habit got to be too old a thing in him, he tacked it down for Danny Laidlaw, fast.

"Hashknife," Big Jesse told him, with a jeer in his voice, "you done me a big favor tonight. Now I'm doin' you one. Git!"

Danny Laidlaw stared at him, slack-jawed. "But—but you promised to take me with you! You said—"

Big Jesse mimicked him in a mocking voice. "'You promised!' Hell, kid, my promise ain't worth a lick o' spit. You think I'd have ary fool button like you ridin' with my outfit?"

It was the kicked-dog look in the kid's eyes that hurt him then, the look of stunned betrayal.

"I kin hold up my end," said Danny Laidlaw stubbornly.

"Hold up your end!" Big Jesse scoffed. "Why, you'd make a bait for a cottonwood limb quicker'n a pup could git fleas."

"They'd have to ketch me first. I ain't afraid of no law."

Big Jesse swore. And then, for the only time in his life, he made a preachment.

"The law ain't meant to be afraid of," stated Big Jesse flatly. "You git that through your fool head, before it's too late. The law's so people won't be afraid. It ain't arything but a rule book, but without it everything'd go plumb to tunket. You stay over on that law side of the fence and stick by the rules and you got nothin' to worry about. You cross over to my side, and you don't dast spit without lookin' over your shoulder."

"I dast to let you loose back there. I'm goin' with you."

The words were like a spark, igniting the tension in Big Jesse. Wheeling his horse abruptly, he struck the kid a slashing blow across the mouth. "By God, I told you to git, and I meant git! Now, you give me ary more lip and I'll—"

He hadn't even thought about the big Walker pistol hanging from the kid's hip, until that moment. Danny Laidlaw's hand plunged down, but before he could yank the gun free, Big

Jesse rocked forward in the saddle and wrenched it out of his hand.

"You jeesly little squirt!" Big Jesse jacked the cartridges out of the gun, then flung it violently backward, across his shoulder. "Now you roll your tail to hell outa here and git back to wranglin' them broncs! And when you've growed some hair on your chest and some brains in your head, mebbe you'll savvy why that ain't a bad deal ag'in' a stiff rope and a short drop."

Danny Laidlaw swiped a hand across his blood-smeared mouth. "I hope you get it! I hope you get it good and quick!"

Big Jesse's voice turned meager. "I ain't aimin' to hurry it none, Danny." His breath heaved out on the words. "But the day'll come, you can bet your shirt. And when it does, there won't be a soul this side of hell's hot acres to give a damn."

So Danny Laidlaw had ridden away, bitter in disillusionment, and with a lump like a thick plum in his throat. And Big Jesse had gone on to the high trails where the owls hoot, mocking the lawless and the lonely.

BIG JESSE had killed men before that, and he lived to kill other men. When the pack is after you, and it's you or them, you shoot to kill, and Big Jesse had never burned a cap wastefully. And he lived for thirteen years more before the law finally caught up with him and, with forthrightness and justice, hung him.

Big Jesse made an ending that earned him respect, if nothing else he had ever done would. He died tough, and if he was afraid, he never showed it. And afterward, when Barney O'Toole looked around for the sheriff, he found he had walked away. Later, he came on him in the office, staring down at a tarnished silver stem-winder watch that lay ticking on the desk in front of him.

O'Toole glanced curiously at the watch as he sank into a chair and stretched out his chunky legs in a gesture of weariness.

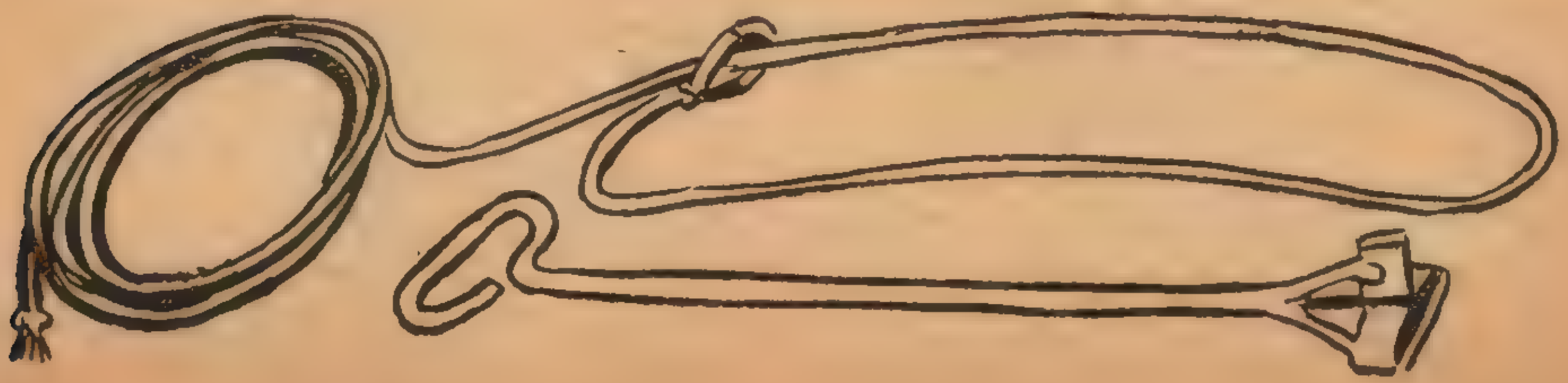
"'Tis a job I've no stomach for," sighed O'Toole, putting his glance on the sheriff. "A black-hearted spalpeen he was, too, and no man to mourn him."

"You don't hide your heart from me, Barney O'Toole." The sheriff's voice held a suppressed quietness. "You'll be saying a Hail Mary for him tonight."

"And I will not!"

In back of his desk, Barney's superior shook his head in a slow thoughtful way, his eyes cast down to the watch.

"Maybe you should. Maybe you should, Barney," said Sheriff Dan Laidlaw softly.



Profile of a rugged frontier individualist . . .

LONE BULL

By EDWIN L. SABIN

A LANK MAN, all sinews and muscle, six feet one, carrot-topped; gaunt, hard visage deeply pocked; shrewd, small gray eyes; speaking with a Missouri twang and traces of education; of amazing endurance and tart wit—that was "Old" Bill Williams, "Parson" Williams, Southwest scout and trapper at large, as reported in his prime, 1832.

Nothing seemed to escape the restless eyes of this hulking, raw-boned man, on whose leathery hatchet face nose and chin nearly met, Punch-fashion; whose nutcracker jaws and peevish, garrulous tongue were long shaped to a frontier jargon. He wore a slovenly rig of greasy elkhide coat, shrunken buckskin breeches, and peaked blanket cap whose stitched-forward corners stood up like wolf ears. Afoot, his gait was shambling, loose-jointed; mounted, he rode with knees high, humped-over, on a tough piebald Nez Percé pony. His rifle muzzle made a "double wobble" in its aim, but his ball scored center. Of Injun ways and queer notions, he showed a liking for the one-man trail with his cayuse and doggish old pack mule—this was Old Bill Williams, "Lone Elk," self-styled "Master Trapper," as figuring in popular later annals.

William Sherley Williams was said to be his full handle, given him in his North Carolina raising. It seemed he'd been a Methodist traveling preacher, or circuit rider, back in Missouri; was on the gospel trail with Bible and saddlebags among the Osage Injuns there. The Osages adopted him. But a white gal wouldn't have him (that was the story) and in a huff he swapped Bible and saddlebags for rifle and pack, took to the Santa Fe trader trail and the trap line in the mountains.

He had the wander foot. With horse and pack he ranged from the Gila and the Great Desert and California in the southwest to the Snake and the Oregon country in the northwest. He would disappear for months at a time, and

turn up at summer rendezvous, or at Taos or Santa Fé, with his pack of pelts; dispose of his catch, go on a frolic, and light out again as poor as a Digger Injun.

Taos was always glad to see him. Fortified with Taos lightning, he cut a caper at the fandagos. His hand was open. Buying a bale of calico, he flung it unrolling into the street and cackled himself out of breath in watching the women, Mexican and Injun, scramble and fight for snatches of it. A barrel of whisky stood in the street and knocked in the head for all to sample was another of his pranks.

The Utes, to whom he was brother and who favored him with two squaws, called him Lone Elk. The bull elk was his medicine. He wouldn't kill a bull elk or allow one to be killed if he had his say. He held that when he went under he would change to a bull elk and roam the hills.

He was Injun wise, and spoke the language; he had lived with those Osages, and with the Hopis of the Little Colorado region northward of the Gila, and with the Utes of the central mountains. How old was he, as figuring from time to time? By his looks and habits he might never have been young. Records place him as full man grown when in 1823 or thereabouts he took to the pack trail; he was guide up the Arkansas River trade route for a government expedition, 1825; on the Gila in 1826; joined the Hopis, 1827; was in the Wind River country of the Shoshones and Gros Vent's in the north, 1832; crossed from the Salt Lake to California, 1833. And so forth and so forth, as notion seized him.

The beaver business thinned out with the close of the 'thirties. The annual rendezvous had quit. In the fall of 1841 Old Bill, with Kit Carson and others, trailed down from the mountains for Bent's Fort on the Arkansas.

Fortunes had been bad. Bill harked back to the spring of last year, when with some twenty followers, whites, Mexicans, and Shawnee hunters, he had crossed the desert again into interior California on a horse gather for the American market. Fifteen hundred animals, horses and mules, had they rounded up on the mission and rancho lands of the San Diego-Los Angeles district, and had beaten out through the Cajon Pass into the Great Desert stretch and the Old Spanish Trail to New Mexico. But the infernal militia and rancheros, two hundred of 'em, had taken after so hotly, on good mounts, that in the Jornada del Muerto —Day March of the Dead—of near a hundred waterless miles, a thousand of the 1,500 animals had become buzzard bait. Their bones were whitening the trail.

The pursuit had stopped at the end of the Jornada, to camp at the water there and rest their mounts. They themselves had pushed on fifteen miles to the Wells of Ramon, with their spent stock, and had faced about to dare the pursuit on. But the fellows didn't come to trap. So in a night they had back-trailed, stampeded every hoof in the Californian camp, left the fellows afoot, and added the animals to the *caballada* still on hand. But, by God, onward in New Mexico the 'Paches turned the same trick by a daybreak raid that put the company to the moccasin trail clean to Santy Fee!

Old Bill continued to hunt in the mountains, with the Grand River region of northern Colorado's Middle Park as his favorite grounds. He win-

tered with his Utes, or in the settlements. In the fall of 1848 he reported himself again down at Hardscrabble, the little mud and skin settlement beside the Upper Arkansas where it entered the foothills of the Colorado Rockies. He was beginning to show his years. His eyesight had failed a trifle, but he still could fetch meat to pot at a hundred paces.

Here was a squatter nucleus of trappers, traders, and their squaws holed in against slack times. And here, in the middle of November, John C. Frémont, the explorer, on the way with thirty or so men to cross the Main Divide in order to map a direct railroad route to the western slopes and California, sought him out. Would Williams guide the company through and over the mountains to the other side? Did he know that country?

Yes, he did. He knew it as well as Frémont knew his own kitchen garden. Frémont reckoned him as sixty-two, and of twenty-five years' experience in the mountains West.

Old Bill was not keen to go. He did not like the looks of things; the trip had better wait till spring opened. These parts were in for a powerful long, hard winter, as Frémont had been told at Bent's Fort, and now by the people here. The Arkansas was already frozen over, chipmunks and ground squirrels had stored fodder early, the medicine lights in the sky signaled cold and more cold, the wolves were howling on the hunger trail, snow had covered the plains—and look at them mountains, all white and cloud-capped or veiled by storms.

It was an evil day for Old Bill Williams when he threw in with the Frémont company to cross those wintry ranges of the rugged San Juan fastnesses. Sunday, November 26, they set on, heading for a storm on the range before, and with Old Bill, hunched upon his mule and blanketed to his ears, in a grumble. But he vowed that he knew of a pass, discovered by himself and named for himself Williams Pass (perhaps Wagon-Wheel Gap on the present map) that would take them through the front range for the climb over the Main, the Continental Divide.

In less than a month of blind travel they were stalled, at 12,000 feet, faced by the Divide, and blocked by blizzards and by drifts thirty feet deep, with animals dying and Old Bill and Frémont at odds as to the course to be taken. All efforts to advance failed. Christmas Day found the company back in the valley of the upper Rio Grande River again, to follow it down and get word of their plight to the New Mexico settlements.

Old Bill and three others were sent ahead to bring the relief. Frémont and company followed, at a mile a day, leaving a trail marked by dead animals and exhausted men.

No relief was met by him in the valley. When time had lapsed he pushed on with a picked squad to get the relief himself.

The Williams squad had fared ill by scant rations and bitter cold that numbed their limbs. There had been campfire smoke in the timber yonder at one side. It signaled a rest station, but Old Bill would have nothing to do with it. "Them's Injuns, boys. It means our ha'r."

"You're brother to the Utes."

"I war, till I played a trick on 'em. Onct, a time back when I war primed with likker, I rode with some sojers ag'in' a passel of 'em, an' Injuns don't forgit that kind of trick. Our topknots

in that thar camp won't do Frémont no good. We're to fetch him relief."

So they by-passed the smoke, and in twenty miles, still short by forty miles of the nearest border settlement in New Mexico downriver, were stalled, themselves. Here Frémont came upon them in their starvation camp, took them on with him to the settlements, from which relief was dispatched to the men still out.

Old Bill finished the winter in Taos. He testily resented the charge by Frémont and others that he had not known his claimed country, and had lost his way in there and misled the expedition. On his part he cited Frémont as bullheaded, refusing his advice. He got support in that and in his abilities of guide.

In the spring he engaged to go back with a scientist of the expedition, Dr. Benjamin Kern, to the upper Rio Grande del Norte, and find the abandoned baggage, particularly Kern's trail trunk, which contained valuable records.

They left in March; were said to have picked up two or three Mexicans on the border for trail hands. They never came out, nothing was heard from them, their bones were never found. Mexicans denied any knowledge of their fate. Only, in April, pieces of Kern's clothing were discovered worn by Mexicans of an outpost village west of Taos. How obtained? In trade? As a gift? As plunder? There was no satisfactory answer.

What of Old Bill Williams, also vanished into mystery? Prominent Ute chiefs would say that he was seized in the mountains, tried in Ute council, executed for his betrayal of his Ute brothers to the enemy, and his body disposed of in a secret place. Or, according to Ute story, he had been killed by mistake in a surprise attack while he was camped, and "was given a chief's burial." Nothing was learned of Kern, but popular opinion would allege that Mexicans coveting the abandoned baggage had done for both men.

Old Bill may have continued to roam in guise of a lone bull elk. Certainly the memory of him lives on in his signatures on the desert and mountains map: Bill Williams Fork of the Colorado; Bill Williams Mountain; Williams station and town, in Arizona; Williams River and its Range, in Colorado's Middle Park.

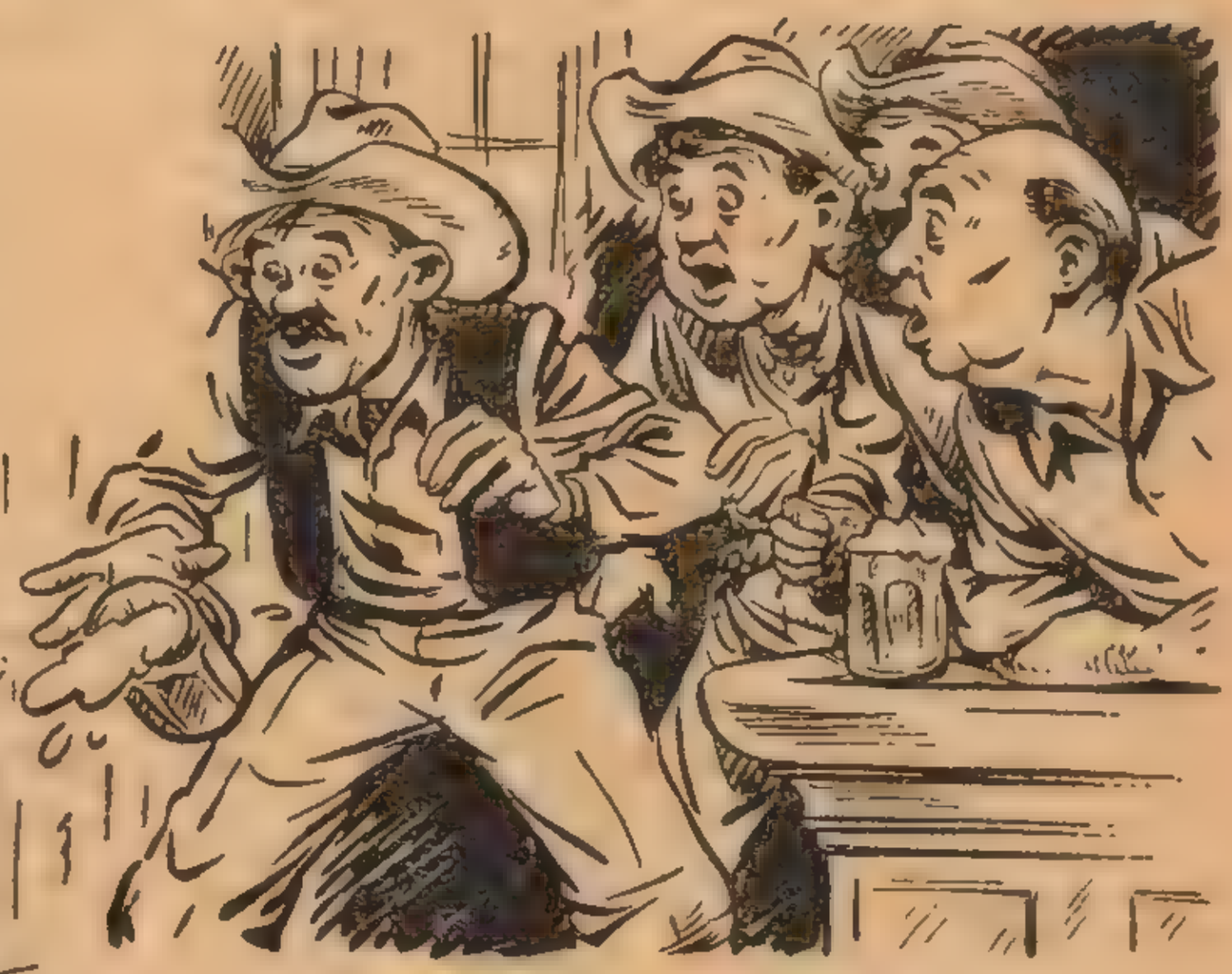
BIG MIX-UP

PERHAPS the biggest mix-up of longhorn cattle in the history of the range took place near Dodge City, Kansas, in August, 1881, when almost fifty trail herds were being held along the Arkansas River valley, either waiting for cars to ship or for instructions from their owners. Just how many cattle and cowboys were involved is hard to say accurately since a trail herd could run from one thousand to four thousand animals, and each outfit had from six to twelve riders, including the cook. A summer thunderstorm broke over the valley just after an IS herd of three thousand yearling steers had hit the bedgrounds. By the time the storm was over, and the cattle quieted down, the herds had run together, run apart, run together again, in such fashion that it took a week's work by all hands to cut out the separate herds and get them "trimmed up" again.

—OLD HUTCH

DEAD MEN TELL TALES

A
"Paintin' Pistoleer"
Yarn



By
WALKER A. TOMPKINS

The Royal Flush troupe hits 'Pache —and cornfusion hits the jackpot.

OLD CROWFOOT HOSKINS is frank to admit that his Cowboy's Rest Hotel, Guaranteed Bugless, ain't exactly in the same cattygory as the Walled-off Astoria. But bein' as how it is the only hotel in Stirrup County, Crowfoot corrals what transient trade they is in this corner of Arizona Territory, which ain't much.

Fact is, Hoskins ain't had more'n two of his ten rooms occupied at a time since a stray skunk undertook to exterminate the termites and mothproof the lodgehall while the Apache Ladies' Knittin' & Peach Presarves Society was in session therein.

None of the good ladies dast to go home contaminated with polecat perfume thataway. So when Crowfoot Hoskins moseyed back to his hotel, after losin' his shirt betting his full house agin Clem Chouder's four aces over at the Feedbag Cafe, he finds hisself with *another* full house on his hands, equally unlucky.

Yep, Crowfoot lost money on that rush of business. Had to burn ever mattress in the place, after the deoderized dames departed to their various and sundered homes. As a result of said fumigation Crowfoot added the Guaranteed Bugless motto to the sign on his false front, all manner of insects being extinked.

Business had been rotten before this skunk episode. After that it fell off sharp. Which same was why Crowfoot perted up when the five theater people who called theirselves the "Royal Flush Troop" got offn the stage and

arrived at the hotel in masses.

At the time, Crowfoot was in his lobby chewing the rag with Justin Other Smith, the young artist feller who is called the Paintin' Pistoleer hereabouts on account of him being the champeen pistol shot of the Territory.

Hashing it over later, Justin O. admitted he was leery of the Royal Flushers from scratch, spotting them for a passel of city slickers out to skin ever cowtown yokel they could. As things turned out, it was a shame Crowfoot didn't listen to Smith's hunch and refuse 'em admission to the hotel, because what them show people done to disturb the peaces was simply offal.

They was five of 'em, all totin' carpetbags plastered up important-like with hotel labels from Peoria and Paris and p'ints in between. "Ace the Acrobat" was the brain of the gang—and as Inky McKrimp remarked in his *Weekly Warwhoop* noosepaper, the singular noun was used advisedly. Ace was a mean one.

Next in line was a red-whiskered runt called "King the Contortionist." The first time he showed up at the Bloated Goat Saloon, half of the menfolks in Stirrup County swore off drink because King bounced into the barroom on his elbows, with his laigs wropped around his neck. Always practicin' his act.

The only shemale in the lot was Queenie Quackenbush, a sort of pore man's Belle Starr, who was buxom and blond. Jack the Nipper (allus awash) was a meek little jasper who did a ventriloquism act. And roundin' out the Royal Flush five was "Ten-Spot" Tenterhook, the magician. What that galoot could do with a pack of cards, slightly-handed, bankruptured Apache's gambling elemunt before he finally left town.

Anyhow. After Ace the Acrobat had introduced his crowd he says, "We aim tø reside in this hostelry while we put on a variety show we've booked at your local Birdcage Theater."

"Birdcage Theater?" Hoskins echoes. "You folks must of got offn the stage at the wrong stop, folks. Lessn you want to commute seventy-eighty mile on foot between shows. Only Birdcage I ever heard tell of is the one over in Tombstone. And *this* burg ain't Tombstone."

The Royal Flushers look royally flustered. Queenie, though, reaches out to tickle Crowfoot under the fuzzy nubbin that goes for his chin, and coos sugary, "If all the menfolks here are as handsome as this one, I'm glad it *isn't* Tombstone. Where are we?"

Crowfoot swallers so fast his Adam's apple looks like a grapefruit caught in the gullet of a ostrich with hiccups. He is as stiff as a week-old case of rigger mortis. It's plumb oblivious to Smith that Crowfoot is hipmatized by this flattery.

"You are in the metropolis of Apache," the Paintin' Pistoleer says after an awkward pause, when it is a parent that Hoskins has been struck mute, ogglin' Queenie like a squab facin' a cobra. "Tombstone," he adds real loud, "is the next town west."

Ten-spot Tenterhook produces a pack of cards and absinthemindedly riffles it from his necktie to his kneecaps like it was an accordeen. "We got off at the wrong station," he admits. "How soon does the next transportation leave for Tombstone, feller?"

Crowfoot bein' still under the spell of Miss Quackenbush's poisonality, the Paintin' Pistoleer acts as interpreter.

again.

"Next stage," he says, "is Tuesday week. No westbound train for a week after that." It is at this junction that Smith happent to spot the stub of a Wells-Fargo ticket juttin' out of Ace's hatband. It has the name APACHE printed on it. Right then and there, Smith corncludes these tinhorns have got off here intentional and are up to no good. So he goes on to say, "Only thing you can do is hop tonight's eastbound stage back to Lordsburg, because every room in this hotel is booked solid for the next ten days."

At this, Crowfoot Hoskins snaps out of his transom in a huff. He yelps at the Paintin' Pistoleer, "Are you loco? You better sprout yoreself a beard, Justin, so's I can't call you a barefaced liar. Why, condemn it, I ain't got a single room rented. Or a double one, either, far as that goes."

Smith realizes it ain't ary of his business so he settles back and listens as Jack the Nipper inquires, "What rates do you charge for the most de lucks accommodations in the house, sir?"

Right here, a very bazaar thing occurs. Jack the Nipper had spoke so low, Smith is shore Crowfoot didn't hear him, Crowfoot being a mite deef. But a rumbly voice comes out of Crowfoot which don't sound a partickle like him: "Rates? Oh, for show folks like you, a dollar a week is plenty. Pay when you leave."

"Fairly reasonable," cackles Ace the Acrobat. "Will you conduct us to our sweets? We each bunk separate. The best is none too good for us thespians."

King the Contortionist reaches up with his left foot to shoo a fly offn his nose and remarks, "Judgin' from the looks of this claptrap lobby the best is none too good, for a fact."

Wellsir, the Paintin' Pistoleer knows damn well that the cheapest rooms Hoskins has got rents for two bits a night, cash in advance. And he knows Crowfoot too well to believe he would cut prices, even for show-business folks—ventriloquists included.

Hoskins looks kind of puzzled, hisself, but he takes Queenie by the arm, picks up her bag, and heads for the stairs with the Royal Flushers follerin' him. All except the grouch, King the Contortionist, who hangs back long enough to drop a bug in Smith's ear, as follers:

"You better tip off that amorous innkeeper to stop makin' calf eyes at Miss Quackenbush," he snarls through his red beard. "I aim to marry Queenie, and I'm jelly of competition, see?"

Well, when Crowfoot finally comes back downstairs after makin' his tenants comfortable, his spirits is as high as the Gila River durin' a flash flood.

"Ain't that Queenie a looloo?" he chortles. "I sw'ar, Justin, I ain't laid eyes on such a curvy carcass since that brewery in Bisbee got its calendars banned from the mails by the noncensors!"

Smith snorts, "She's got an hourglass figure with about forty minutes left over, you mean. Say—did you know you cut your room rent to a dollar a week for that crowd, Crowfoot?"

Hoskins blinks like he's minus a couple of buttons. "Cut my rates?" he bellers. "You're puttin' words in my mouth!"

"Jack the Nipper beat me to it," Smith says. Then he goes on to relay the warning given out by King the Contortionist regarding his matrimonial intentions with Miss Quackenbush. But Hoskins's mind is miles away—or

to be exact, up in the Bridle Sweet where Queenie will be spending the rest of the week.

"The Good Book says man ain't born to live alone," Crowfoot muses pious, drooling tobacco juice like a leaky cuspidor. "I got a lot to offer a gal. Long-established business. Better'n two hundred simoleons stashed away in the Stockman's Bank. No debts. No bad habits. Why, Queenie would be a fool to go on traipsin' around the kentry on one-night standards, livin' out of a trunk, when she could live on the fat of the land as Missus C. Hoskins."

Smith groans. "Only way she could live on the fat of the land in this town would be to get the job reducin' Hernia Groot and Anvil Aggie and the other oversized she-blisters hereabouts," he says, and vamoses out of the hotel, plumb disgusted with Crowfoot. Goes to show, though, a man is never too old to yearn.

Wellsir, that evening young Smith is in at the Bloated Goat Saloon sipping a buttermilk and roundsiding with Sol Fishman of the O.K. Mercantile, Lew Pirtle the Overland Telegraph operator, Lawyer Plato X. Scrounge the local justice of the peaces, and a few other regular patrons of bartender Curly Bill Grane, when the door slams open and in struts Ace the Acrobat, dressed to kill.

He's a danged show-off, that's for shore; because instead of plantin' a hoof on the brass rail and orderin' a drink, he does a handspring onto the bar, spins around on his bald head like a top, and whilst he is doing same he snatches a Blue Bagpipe whisky bottle from Curly Bill, plucks the tin star offn the vest of Sheriff Rimfire Cudd who happent to be standing closest, whups the derby offn Lord Delpus the Englishman's head, and winds up by chousing a boiled egg from the free-lunch platter.

While everbody stares goggle-eyed at these shenanigans, Ace stops spinnin' and begins to juggle these oddments for a spell. He winds up by doing a double flip-flop to the floor, whereupon he balances the whisky bottle on his chin, Lord Delpus's derby on top of the bottle, the boiled egg on top of that, and tops off his Christmas tree with Rimfire Cudd's star.

Balancin' act over, Ace restores his props to their proper owners and takes a deep bow. Apache folks just stand around plumb putrified, not havin' seen the likes of these goings-on since the New Year's Eve four-five years back when Aw Gwan, the Chinee cook over to Dyspepsia Dan's restaurant, let the boys take a few puffs on his opium pipe.

What Ace was after, of course, was for somebody to offer him a free drink. When none was forthcomin', this actor feller smiles friendly-like and remarks, "Gentlemen, you all appear to be average intelligent. I've invented a little game I call the 'Alphabet Race.' Anybody care to play it with me and win some easy money for hisself without riskin' any? You can't lose."

The Bloated Goat crowd continues stoopified. Finally Jim Groot, the banker, lets his curiosity git the better of his jedgement by asking, "How-all do you play this here alphybet game?"

Ace the Acrobat rubs his hands and purrs like a grizzly cub.

"Well," he smirks, "you gents know yore ABC's, I presume? The rules are simple. You compose a sentence, startin' with the letter A. The second word

starts with B, the third with C, the fourth with D, and so on, for as far up the alphabet as you can git and still make sense. For instants, here is a short sample to go by: All Better Cooks Devil Eggs Frequently. Git it?"

"Sounds easy," Groot agrees. "Whar does the money come in?"

Ace chuckles. "I will pay a dollar a word for any sentence you boys string out up to and includin' the tenth letter of the alphabet," he says. "The tenth letter being--lessee, now. A-B-C-D-E-F-Gee whiz, the tenth letter happens to be J, as in joke or jackass. See how simple it is? You can't lose."

The saloon is quiet enough to hear a bumblebee belch. Then Lawyer Scrounge gets his legal brains to perking.

"What's the ketch?" he wants to know. "What are you drivelin' at? You say you'll pay a buck a word for ever word up to an' includin' the tenth. But what ifn a man cain't *reach* the J? Huh?"

Ace shrugs smug. "In that case *I* collect a dollar for each word you fall short of the tenth letter. But you won't. Any incomepooper with the brains God give a crowbar can win. This game is as strickly on the up-an'-up as a cow's tail, gentlemen."

The first sucker who riz to the bait is Inky McKrimp, the editor. He rides over from a corner astraddle of his jenny mule, Queen Cleopatra, and brags, "I'll take you on, feller! How's this: A Brown Cow Dropped--excuse me. A Black Cat Died--" With which Inky run plumb out of steam. And him a perfessional word-slinger!

His tally was four words, which left him owing Ace six bucks. Inky pays up and rides his mule out, sore as a humped-up cat.

Lord Delpus does a mite better with "Africa's Black Cannibals Detest Eating Fresh Ground Hamburger," but just the same this city slicker raked in another two dollars from his lordship.

Everbody knowed Sheriff Rimfire Cudd should of had his head bored for the simples, wanting to buck Ace's gyp game, but you can't tell the old gaffer nothin'. He petered out on "Any Blind Cat Desarves Feed," and had trouble borryin' a fin to pay off.

After that, the boys shy off. The game would of ended right then and there, ifn the Paintin' Pistoleer hadn't stuck his ore in: "What happens if a player composes a sentence *beyond* the tenth letter of the alphabet, Señor?"

Ace at the moment is so busy totting up his profits he only gives Smith a side glance. Smith is a small-packaged galoot, and right now he is wearin' a look on his face that makes him resemble a half-witted baboon, his eyes crossed and his mouth slobberin' open like some loony tick's.

"So the Village Idiot is heard from," Ace sneers. "Boy, I will pay *two* dollars for every word beyond J, and for any mental genius who can carry through to the letter Z, an intelligible twenty-six-word sentence with the initial letters spelling the alphabet in order--with the exception of the letter X, which I will throw in free--I will pay a jackpot prize of one hundred dollars. Making a grand total, with the bonus, of one hundred and fifty-two dollars! You can't lose, boy."

All eyes is glued to the Paintin' Pistoleer. He scratches his armpit like a demented embicile and blubbers in a giggly voice like he was behint the door when brains was bein' distributed. "Uu-uh, I'll take a stab at the

game. Here goes—"

Ace the Acrobat gets ready to keep tally on his fingers.

"Uh—A," Justin begins, and then seems to run short on ideas. "A—?"

"By the way, short and ugly," Ace sneers, "when a player shoots for the grand prize he has to g'arantee me fifty bucks if he loses, regardless of how far he gets. O.K.?"

"O.K.," the Paintin' Pistoleer agrees, and a big groan sweeps the barroom. Everbody likes young Smith; and while they know he makes good money selling his oil paintings, they hate to see Smith git sheared like a lamb by this smooth rascal.

Smith pulls in a deep breath. Then he rattles off faster than a stick scrapin' along a picket fence:

"Arizona's Busiest Cowboy Drove Eighty Fat Geldings Home In July, Keeping Lots More Nourished On Poor Quality Range, Selling The Undesirable Varmints With Expert Young Zeal. I'm too wore out tonight to make Xylophone fit in," he applegizes, "so we won't count that Xpert."

Wow! Ace the Acrobat is rooted to the floor like he'd been hit by lightning. His mouth is flapping open like the drop seat of a pair of red-flannel drawers and you could of looped a harness ring around his eyeballs, they was pooched that far out of their sprockets.

Finally he whines, "Sorry, young man, but yore sentence wasn't grammatical. Tell you what—we'll call it a draw, on account of you makin' such a good try. Now who's next?"

Plato X. Scrounge is the first man to react to this welshing. He interdooces himself as the local justice of the peaces and adds, "Smith's sentence made sense to me, Señor. Either you pay up—or I'll have the sheriff here lock you up on a fragrancy charge, et al."

"Yeah!" gobbles Rimfire Cudd. "Take yore pick—the jackpot or jail. Smith cleaned yore plow, square an' above the boards."

Ace blusters a bit, but finally he fishes in his pants and produces a poke stuffed like a sassage with greenbacks. He peals off a hunderd and fifty-two frogskins, hands them to the Paintin' Pistoleer, and then hightails out of the saloon like a greased eel squirtin' down a wet waterpipe.

Justin Other Smith makes shore none of the bills was counterfitty, and then he tells Curly Bill to set up the house till the dinero was used up. Everbody swarms around, corngratulating Smith on skinning that slicker at his own game, but Smith ain't payin' any tension to all this celebratin'. He's worried about Crowfoot Hoskins pickin' out Queenie Quackenbush to end his bachelorhood.

Soon as he can, Justin O. slips away and takes a pasear over to the hotel. Sure enough, proprietor Hoskins is out on a porch bench with Queenie. Justin overhears Crowfoot braggin' about the two hunderd bucks he's got saved up, and it's plain to be seed that Queenie is workin' herself up a $kinful of $team, fa$t.

Inside the lobby Smith finds King the Contortionist perched on the nape of his neck on the stairway newel post. His feet is tucked in his hip pockets while he is busy cleaning a six-shooter. That walloper, seems as though, is *allus* practicing his act.

"I'll cool that two-bit Romeo's larder for him," the Contortionist is grumblin' to hisself. "Droolin' sweet nothings in Queenie's ear. Gelding the lily. Beatin' my time. Why, I'll blast that

tinhorn's prognosis so full of lead they'll bust a derrick lowerin' him into his early grave. Aaaaargh! Pt-tooie!"

Smith is afraid King ain't bluffin'. So he hikes over to his art studio upstairs over the Longhorn Saddle Shop, and comes back to the Cowboy's Rest Hotel wearin' his famous .32 Colt on a .45 frame where King gets a good look at it.

The Paintin' Pistoleer hangs around until the spooners mosey in offn the porch, around three a.m., Queenie giggling and old Crowfoot flushed up like a cheap job of embalming. Smith sticks around until Queenie and Crowfoot have said their good nights and Queenie waddles off upstairs to her bunk.

King twists hisself up like a can full of fishing worms and slithers off to bed hisself, remarking for Crowfoot's bennyfit that he will bite his time. Hell is definitely out of the shuck.

Well, during the next day and a half Justin Other Smith don't get a wink of sleep, he's so busy making sure Crowfoot don't get ambushed by Queenie's jealous lover. Durin' this time Ten-spot Tenterhook is running a high-stakes poker game over at the Bloated Goat, mopping up all the loose change floating around Stirrup County with that educated pack of cards of his.

The evening of the third night of Crowfoot's courtship on the hotel porch bench, Smith as usual is handy on the bottom step, keeping an eye on King the Contortionist. But he dozes off and the next thing he knows, Anvil Aggie, the 340-pound blacksmith from the Mares' Nest Livery Barn, is shaking him awake.

"Justin," Aggie blubbers sad as a bloodhound's eye, "something terrible is fixing to happen. Half hour ago, Crowfoot Hoskins comes to the stable and rents a hoss and buggy to take that Queenie jessie-belle joy-ridin' over to Neverfailin' Springs. They had hardly pulled out when that loco idjut they call King the Confectionist rushes in, walkin' on his feet for a change, and tells me to saddle up the fastest nag I got in the barn. He rid off toward the Springs in less time than you could holler howdy, wavin' a shootin' iron. I don't like the looks of it, Justin. It's give me a headache built for a bull elephant."

Now, it so happens that Jack the Nipper is nursin' a bottle on a porch bench within earshot of Aggie, or closer than that even, seeing as how Aggie can't whisper softer than a cyclone blowin' up. And that is why Aggie passes out in a cold faint when she hears her mongrel hound dog, Meathead, remark to Justin O. Smith in a distinct voice:

"This is a very serious situation, Mr. Smith. King is extremely sensitive about any other man paying court to Miss Quackenbush. I would advise riding to Mr. Hoskins's rescue with a minimum of delay. Grrr-woof!"

Smith yells, "Thank you, Meathead!" before he realizes what he's saying, and sprints for the stable where he keeps Skeeter, his palomino. Without wasting time saddling up, the Paintin' Pistoleer forks Skeeter and hightails out of town in the direction of the dried-up waterhole known as Neverfailing Springs, a favor-ite spot for young sports to woo womenfolks hereabouts.

About a mile, mile and a half from the Springs, Justin O. hears the crack of a gunshot from that direction. He rowels Skeeter into a dead run, and when he reaches the waterhole he sees

the hoss and buggy waitin' there. And he smells gunsmoke.

Queenie Quackenbush is sobbing her eyes out alongside of two limp shapes sprawled in the dusty bottom of Never-failing Springs. Smith recognizes one of 'em as his amigo, Crowfoot Hoskins. T'other one is King the Contortionist. King won't contort no more. He's got a bullet hole drilled through his noggin.

Crowfoot is alive, though. Queenie says she had to knock him out with the butt of a buggy whip to save her own hide.

"It was horbull," Queenie sniffles. "Dear Mr. Hoskins was making love to me when King gallops out of the brush. Next thing I knew, dear Mr. Hoskins had drawn a gun and shot King dead. Then he got ascairt I'd tell the law and said he would have to kill poor, defenseless little me. So I had to lay him out cold."

Smith investigates and finds that Crowfoot is clutching his old .44 cap-and-ball Dragoon. It's got one empty in the cylinder. Whereas King ain't got hide nor hair of a gun or knife on his person. To all intense and porpoises the evidence is 100 percent convulsive that Queenie is giving the true story of the murder.

"Plain case of homicide with a triangle love-motive," Smith says heavy-like. "We'd best git back to town and report this."

They load Crowfoot and the dead contortionist into the buggy and go back to Apache. Doc Sigmoid Grubb, as county coroner, takes charge of King's corpus, over in his shack where he carries on his doctorin', barberin', dentistry, and vetinary business.

When old Crowfoot comes to, he finds hisself in jail with Sheriff Rimfire Cudd waitin' to question him. Queenie is having highsterics, so she is over at Samanthie Coddlewort's house. Justin O. arranged this a-purpose, because he wants to have a look around Miss Quackenbush's room at the Cowboy's Rest Hotel. When he leaves her Bridle Sweet he is perty well satisfied with his detective work.

Everbody in town is congregated around the jail where Crowfoot is locked up. Rimfire lets Smith into Hoskins's cell. He finds the old codger as frustrated as a broken-billed woodpecker running amuck in a shingle factory. Crowfoot's story don't jibe with the one Queenie told in any respect.

"I'd just got nerve up to give Queenie a kiss," Hoskins sobs, "and that's the last I kin remember till I wake up in this hoosegow. Boys, that girl can kiss! The like of which thar ain't no whicher."

Well, the sheriff talks with Jack the Nipper and Ten-spot Tenterhook and Ace the Acrobat, who spill the beans about how King the Contortionist has been threatenin' to kill Hoskins if he don't quit sparkin' King's girl. This is information Justin O. had hoped to keep quiet. As things stand, Crowfoot is a sure cinch to stretch hangrope for shootin' an unarmed defenseless rival.

Smith has a private cornfab with Sigmoid Grubb, as a result of which the coroner says he'll hold a public inquest this very night in the Busted Flush Dance Hall, courtesy of Rosette Cogbottle Chouder, owner of said honkytonk. It's jam-packed inside of a jiffy.

While Grubb is moving the Contortionist's remains over to the dance hall, Smith has a powwow with the

voice-thrower, Jack the Nipper, and hides him ahint a curtain on the bandstand where Doc has laid out King's body on top of the piano.

King makes a perty sorry sight stretched out there with his red whiskers juttin' up like a whiskbroom. Accordin' to Ace the Acrobat, it's the first time he's ever seed King reclinin' like a normal human bean. "He usually sleeps kinked up like a rejected pretzel or a snarled fishline," Ace says. "Practicin' his act."

It's around midnight when Sigmoid Grubb finishes pickin' a coroner's jury: Jim Groot, Ace the Acrobat, Ten-Spot Tenterhook, Dyspepsia Dan, Heck Coddlewort, and the Paintin' Pistoleer. Sheriff Cudd is on hand with pore old Crowfoot as his prisoner, and Lawyer Plato X. Scrounge is escortin' the chief and only witness, Queenie Quackenbush, who by now has calmed down cornsiderble.

Things git under way with Queenie very reluctant telling how Crowfoot shot King, claimin' she loves Crowfoot dearly. Crowfoot is too embarrassed to speak in his own defense, on account of it involves telling what a powerful punch Queenie's kisses pack.

"I must of shot King while I was concentratin' on proposin' marriage and didn't know what I was doin'," is all Hoskins says.

Durin' a lull in the proceedings, Justin Other Smith strolls over to the piano to examine King's bullet wound close up.

"What a pity," he says glum-like, "King's lips are sealed."

Just then something peculiar takes place. Right in plain view of everbody, the dead man opens his mouth and remarks, "I don't mind talkin', Mister Smith. The killer is in our midst. But he ain't Crowfoot Hoskins. Mister Hoskins is bein' framed."

Wellsir, when the dead man's jaws stops wagging, the only noise to break the silence is the occasional thuds around the hall as folks start topplin' over in faints. The only rannihan who ain't paralyzed stiff by King's remarks is Justin O. Smith.

"Who *did* kill you, Mister King?" Smith inquires in that soft Alabama drawl of hisn, "if this isn't being too personal?"

The red whiskers twitch again as the corpse says, "Queenie Quackenbush plotted to kill me with the husband she is secretly married to. He fired the fatal shot. His name is really Jeff Pootpuddle, but on the stage he is billed as—"

It ain't polite to interrupt the dead whilst they are speaking from beyont the veil. But Queenie is past rememberin' her ettyket. She grabs Ace the Acrobat by the arm and screeches, "The jig is up, Jeff darlin'. We've got to vamose!"

Ace the Acrobat claws out a derringer. But the Paintin' Pistoleer ain't a champeen for nothin'. His .32 on a .45 frame is cutting down on Ace faster than the devil could fry a hoss thief.

Well, Ace just caves in. He whimpers to Queenie, "If you'd kept your big mouth shet we'd of been O.K. Ain't you heard Jack the Nipper throw his voice often enough to recognize it?"

With which Jack the Nipper comes out from behint the curtain. The ventriloquist had added to the optional illusion of making King talk by jerkin' on a red silk thread tied to King's whiskers.

Queenie called her shot when she said the jig was up. So when Rimfire Cudd has them locked up safe in jail,

Ace the Acrobat elabberates somewhat.

"Queenie an' me married secretly a year ago," he cornfesses, "but King made such a nuisance of hisself trying to git Queenie to marry him, we decided he had to be got rid of. Decided to put the blame for his killin' on this Crowfoot Hoskins yokel.

"I was waitin' out at Neverfailin' Springs tonight when Queenie got Hoskins to drive her out there in the buggy. She puts Crowfoot to sleep, so I takes his six-gun and when King rode in helter-swelter, I drygulched him. But how Jack the Nipper knew what to make King say, beats me all holler."

The Paintin' Pistoleer explains that angle. Seems when Smith had ransacked Queenie's baggage at the hotel tonight, he found two interesting items in her possibles. One was $200 in legally tender dinero, which same Jim Groot cornfirmed was the bank account Queenie had fleeced Crowfoot out of that day.

T'other clue was a marriage certificate made out to Queenie and a hombre name of Jeff Pootpuddle, which tipped off Smith that Miss Quackenbush warn't exactly eligible for another plunge into wholly matrimony with Crowfoot.

"I had a hunch this Jeff Pootpuddle was the killer, and that he must be one of King's own crowd," Smith goes on to say. "I knew the whereabouts of two of the actors at the time of the murder. Tenterhook was dealing off the bottom at the Bloated Goat; and Jack the Nipper was making hound dawgs talk over at the hotel. So that left Ace the Acrobat as the only four-flusher—excuse—me, Royal Flusher—who was unaccounted for. I figgered his real name must be Jeff Pootpuddle. But I had to prove it."

And just to top it off, you might say, the Paintin' Pistoleer spiels off a little farewell parable in the swindle style of Ace the Acrobat's alphabet game:

"Although Bad Characters Deserve Every Favor Granted Here In Jail, Killing Lovelorn Men Needlessly Ordains Pretty Quick Retribution, So These Ugly Vipers Will Xperience Yuma's Zephyrs!"

And he was right—Ace and Queenie wind up behind bars at Yuma pennytentiary pronto. Sheriff Cudd let Tenterhook go after he had refunded the dinero he had won with his marked cards. And of course Jack the Nipper was O.K., his voice-throwin' having busted the case open by scaring the cornfession out of Queenie.

So the upshoots was that Crowfoot Hoskins didn't get stung by a hanging bee after all. He larnt his lesson, too. Since this hellabaloo simmered down, the one and only female of the species Crowfoot will tip his hat to—or even allow anywhars near his hotel—is Inky McKrimp's jenny mule, Queen Cleopatra. For a fact!

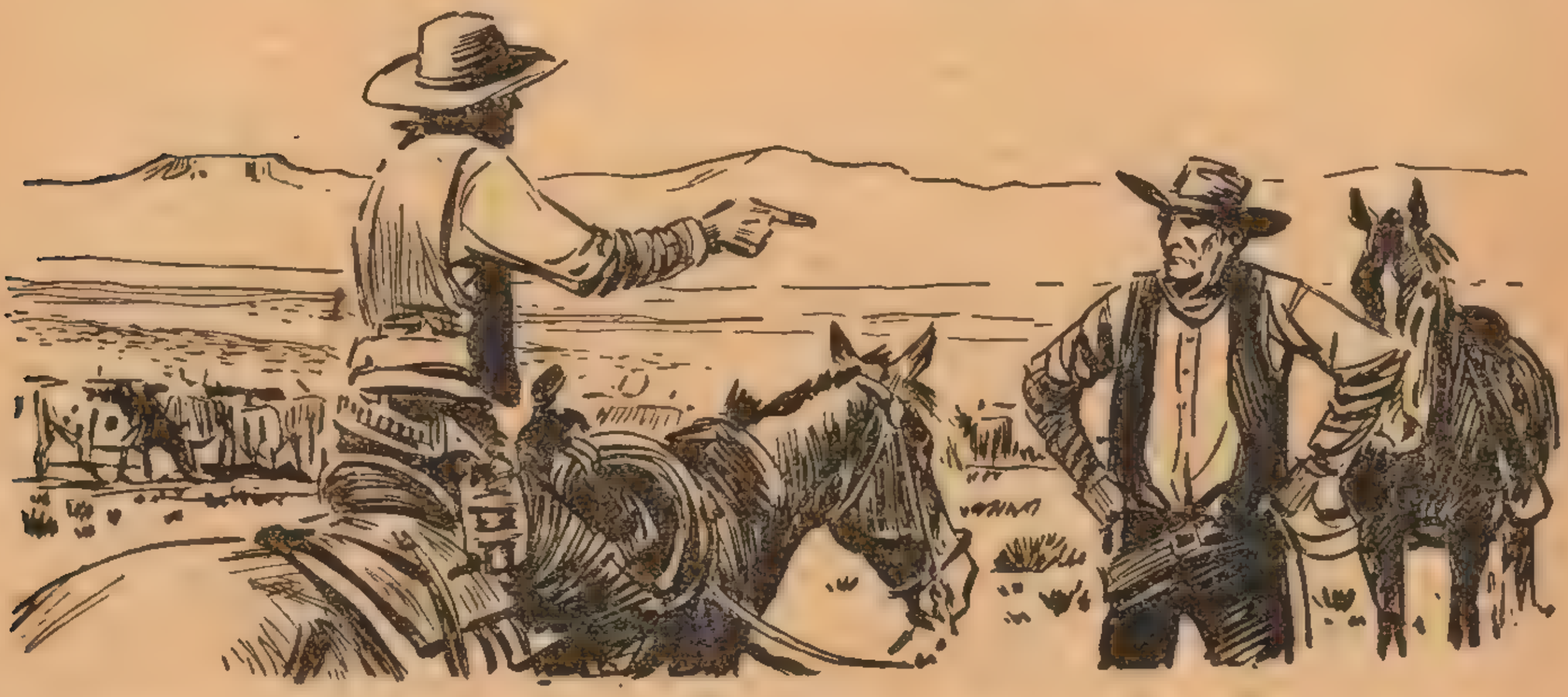
THE LADY AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

ANY DOUBT AS TO THE STATUS OF WOMEN in the Old West can be dispelled by recourse to the records in Susanville, California, when the wife of Rough Elliott stood off the Plumas County Tax Collector with a shotgun.

"There was no danger of her being hurt, for at that time women were very scarce and more valuable than horses, cattle or taxes."

—OLD HUTCH

Texan was ranged against Texan when the "Association" and the "Sooners" struggled for control of the Montana grasslands.



Battle of the Bobwire

By T. J. KERTTULA and D. L. McDONALD

THERE is one fight you won't find mentioned in the history books of the Lone Star State, though it was fought by Texans. It raged over the green-grass plains of Montana, more than a thousand miles north of the Rio Grande, and Texans battled fellow Texans till their cattle died by the thousands in the icy drifts and the bitter Montana winter broke them all.

Today, there are few to remember the time, roughly three-quarters of a century ago, when the men from Texas were virtual dictators of Montana. On the whole theirs was a benevolent dictatorship, blandly tolerating the local prospectors and Indians along with the native coyotes and prairie dogs. This tolerance, however, did not extend to the "Sooners," who were also Texans. And, since it is a well-established fact that no Texan will stand for being pushed around, least of all by another Texan, trouble was the natural result.

Prior to the coming of the men from the Lone Star State, Montana's citizens had been notably indifferent to their thousands upon thousands of acres of grassland. When a man could burn the grease out of a skillet and "pan" out a fortune in gold dust almost anywhere he tried, why should he be interested in anything else? As far as Montanans were concerned, grass was for one purpose only—feed for the buffalo herds upon which they depended for a considerable portion of their diet.

Then, swiftly, the buffalo were swept into oblivion by the hide hunters, and northward rolled the first wave of Texas longhorns. In 1880 a man could ride

the central Montana ranges for days without being out of the sight and scent of buffalo. Three years later the buffalo were gone, and the ranges held more than half a million longhorns. And more were on the way.

Reaching these lush open grasslands, the trail drivers found the country they had been looking for and allowed their herds to scatter. While the crews set about putting up headquarters, the boss usually rode over to get acquainted with his next-door neighbor—anywhere from a dozen to twenty miles away—who, like himself, had in all probability just arrived from Texas. They came to an understanding quickly enough, and creeks, hills, rivers, and mountain ranges were used as rough boundaries to designate the range belonging to each.

With others of their own kind, they soon formed an association which was destined to play a leading role in the forthcoming war. It drew them into a tightly knit group which succeeded in controlling tens of thousands of square miles of public domain to which they had no more right than the next man.

Having no claim to the land, they invented one. And also a process of "legalizing" it—at least to the point where it would look formidable when backed by a sufficient number of six-guns. This process was simply to insert a notice in the nearest weekly paper, which might well be as far away as Denver, Colorado, to the effect that all lands lying between certain natural boundaries were "private range."

Publishing this notice periodically, although no one but their own members might ever see it, they considered the range their own and set about keeping others off. These, then, were the Texans who ruled the Montana grassland, and in local history they are still known by the respectful name of "the Cattlemen," or, occasionally, "the Association."

The second class of Texans to invade Montana were usually known as the "Sooners," a name which, it was implied, branded a person as being inferior even to a sheepherder. To most old-timers, a sheepherder represented *zero* in the scale of social standing. A cowman—one of the Association—rated a plus one hundred, while a Sooner ranked a minus one followed by a string of zeros stretching clear over the hill. It made no difference if, in his home state, the Sooner had been a respectable cattleman. Here he was one of those despicable varmints—and the only way he could become respectable again was to get the hell out of Montana. The farther away, the better.

Actually, the only difference between the Cattlemen and the Sooners was that the Cattlemen got there "the fustest with the mostest." They tried to keep the newcomers off by claiming that the range was overstocked. In fact, they kept hollering "wolf" so often they didn't recognize overstocking when it did come along a few years later.

Just because he had started his herds awhile later, or had taken a somewhat longer route, was in the Sooner's opinion no reason for being denied access to this range. Nor was he; he threw his herds onto the land anyhow, and then blithely asked the Cattlemen just what the hell they thought they could do about it. They did plenty.

That guns didn't start popping right then and there can only be attributed to the fact that the Sooners were just as large outfits, with as many and as

warlike riders, as the Cattlemen. To go booting them around—like homesteaders—might accidentally result in considerable thinning in the ranks of the Association. With firepower so nicely balanced, it had to be a cold war. There were, to be sure, several regrettable incidents, but they just buried the results and let it pass.

Just before the new legislature convened, the Association held a meeting marked by excited speeches concerning this new threat to their way of life. Then, still fired by the excitement of the convention, the members of the legislative committee forked their broncs and hit the trail for Helena.

Politically, the livestock and mining industries were the two most powerful groups in the state. The Association committee, having settled itself in comfortable quarters, invited the mining boys over for a drink and a bull session. In effect, they said:

"Boys, we've got a little bill we'd like to get passed so as to help us curb rustlers and other trespassers. If you'll help us push it through we'll see that all stockmen in the legislature vote against the new tax on the output of mines."

It was a profitable deal for the mining men, and in due course the Cattlemen's bill became a law. Among its provisions was one making it a misdemeanor to drive stock from its customary range, and it carried a good stiff penalty for doing so. "Customary range" became the Association battle cry, and all its members rallied to it. Now they had a weapon with which, all legal and everything, they could make life miserable for the Sooners.

It made life miserable all right—not only for the Sooners, but for everybody even remotely connected with the cattle business. In the first place no one, not even the Cattlemen who wrote it, could adequately define the term "customary range," so wide was its scope.

In fact, it hasn't been defined yet, although the law is still on the books of the sovereign State of Montana.

Theoretically, it should have stopped the Sooner from trying to force the Association's stock off the range to make room for his own. It did; or at least it made him change his tactics somewhat. But, presuming he could drive the Cattlemen's longhorns over the river and coax them into staying there, didn't *that* become their customary range? Anywhere a locoed longhorn chose to bed down could produce startling results under this law, and the only opinion worth anything, could they have obtained it, would have been that of the cows themselves.

After a few brushes with the law, the Sooners abandoned their attempts to push the others' stock off the range, and merely mixed theirs in with them. Thereby, of course, establishing it as *their* cows' customary range, too. When the Association's riders started cleaning them out, the Sooners loped for town and, using the Cattlemen's law, paddled them with their own sword.

So numerous were these cases, and so bitter was the wrangling, that at least one justice of the peace forsook the bench for "a safe and sane job herding sheep." Some old-timers say that if you wanted to stampede all the lawyers in any Montana town, all you had to do was get out in the middle of the street and holler the one word: "Cow!"

This Customary Range law having proven somewhat lacking, the Associa-

tion decided to abandon it. Another meeting was called, and a resolution passed to the effect that the Cattlemen "would co-operate in no way with these range pirates." Attached to the resolution were the names of local Sooners, and copies were plastered to every upright object large enough to hold one. A few of the weaker sisters among the Sooner population took the hint and moved on to other ranges. The rest had other plans.

Based on their non-co-operation resolution, the Cattlemen believed they had now produced an effective weapon against the Sooners. At the time, it was the usual procedure for ranchers to work their stock by holding joint roundups with adjoining outfits. The mavericks the roundup picked up were of course divided between those taking part, and the strays they usually ate. No one ever knowingly ate his own beef unless having dinner with a neighbor.

As the Sooner was not an Association member, the resolution actually meant that the Cattlemen would not let him take part in the common roundup and consequently he would be deprived of any share in the maverick cut. Unless it was ready to start shooting on a much bigger scale than anything that had been done so far, that seemed to be about all the Association could do to the Sooners.

These latter were undaunted; that is, those who had elected to stay. They merely started their own private roundups a bit sooner than the general one of the Cattlemen--thereby earning the name which, at the time, was the ultimate in contempt.

At first, the "Sooner roundup" seemed a huge joke, and the Cattlemen laughed long and uproariously as they watched the lone Sooner outfits ride out to do singlehanded a job which was plenty big for even a dozen outfits working together.

They didn't laugh for long. In fact, they shifted to cussing when, a few weeks later, their own roundup revealed the fact there wasn't a blasted maverick for anyone to divide. "First come, first served," argued the Sooners --and took them all.

What was still worse, while the Association members complained of the short calf crop, most of the Sooner cows had so many as to constitute a biological marvel. Twins and triplets were average; quads and quints commonplace. Beyond that, the Cattlemen could not bear to count.

One old cowman, meeting a Sooner on the open range, is quoted as saying, "You thus-and-so, you'd better git busy teachin' them cows of yours birth control. If they keep on havin' twins every year, I'm purely goin' to blow your head off. Though," he went on thoughtfully, "if they keep on havin' four or five to a clutch--an' my cows all barren --I ain't sure whose brains I should blow out, at that."

Finally, the bickering grew bitter enough to attract the attention of the federal government. The Land Commissioner wanted to know why, on Government-owned Montana land, cattlemen were issuing reports that the ranges were overstocked, and then using that as a pretext to drive other settlers out. The tone of the Commissioner's inquiry should have served as a warning to the Cattlemen, but the Government was far away in Washington and a bit unreal, while the Sooners were on the range and very real.

For the Association members the situation was fast growing desperate.

The Sooners were becoming more firmly entrenched all the time. And, in one of their earlier efforts to starve out the newcomers, the Association had systematically overstocked their ranges. Each year the situation grew worse. And now, to further aggravate the matter, stockmen were ordered out of the Indian Territory. In one summer alone over a hundred thousand head of longhorns from Oklahoma were moved to central Montana.

There was only one way left to keep the Sooners off. After much bitter wrangling among themselves, the Cattlemen finally adopted it. They bought "bobwire," strung drift fences, and put out line riders to see that the fences were not cut. That took considerable doing, for fencing the range was an offense for which they would cheerfully have hanged their own best friend a year earlier. "Bobwire" production took a big upswing, and most of it came to decorate the scenery of Montana. But the end, the Cattlemen felt, justified the means. The fenced-out Sooner longhorns would soon begin to starve.

This time the federal government really took notice. Cattlemen by the dozens were hauled into court and read ear-burning lectures by United States judges, who wanted to know just what right men—who were themselves trespassing on the public domain—had to keep others off it. They ordered the fences torn down, immediately.

In the combination of "bobwire" and line riders, the Association had the best weapon against the Sooners they had so far devised. Naturally they were reluctant to abandon it, and kept stalling for time, hoping the whole matter would be forgotten. But the courts and the Land Office didn't forget. Slowly, balking at every step, Association members started pulling down their fences. Too slowly for their own good.

The winter of 1886-87 was probably the worst ever recorded in Montana. Cattle, drifting helplessly before the blizzards, piled up against the fences the Cattlemen were supposed to have removed, and died there by the thousands. On some ranges the loss was over ninety-five percent of the total number of stock. It was here that Charlie Russell made his famous sketch, "The Last of The Five Thousand."

With the aid of the weather, the Cattlemen had finally broken the Sooner invasion. Only to find themselves in the same boat. The few that managed to survive financially on each side continued to battle in a half-hearted fashion, but their old spirit was gone.

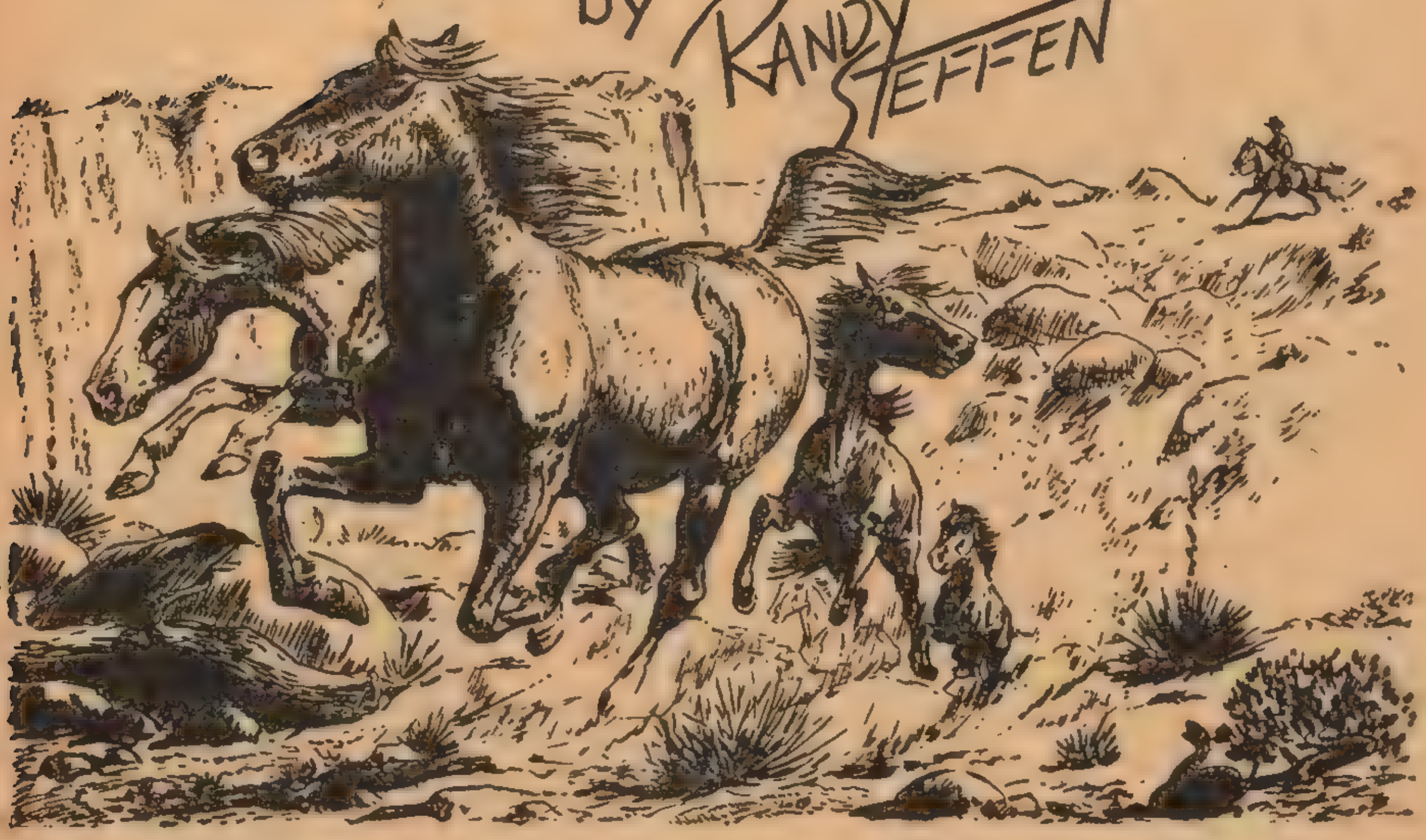
In 1895 the Montana legislature passed a law prohibiting the branding of cattle on the open range between the first of December and the first of May. If it had come in time, this might have been the most effective weapon the Cattlemen could have had against the phenomenal increase of the Sooner herds, but by that time both the antagonists and the open range were gone.

Gone, too, were those fabulous Sooner cattle. Outwardly they may have seemed typical longhorns—mean-natured, leggy creatures with hides only one degree tougher than their steaks—but no one else has succeeded in developing a breed of cows which consistently produced from two to six calves each every year!

The price of beefsteak nowadays, cows like that could be valuable.

MUSTANGER

by Randy Steffen



A ZGWM Pictorial Feature

THE ways of the mustanger are many and strange! Volumes could be written without setting down all there is to know about mustangs and the men who catch them. I don't reckon there's a man alive who's had the mustang fever and couldn't learn a little something from another wild-horse hunter.

While there are still as many as ten thousand wild horses ranging in several states in the West, the day of the mustanger is about over. All but a comparatively few of the tens of thousands of feral horses that used to inhabit the plains and mountains of the cow country have been trapped out by professional mustangers to make way for the great beef herds so necessary to our twentieth-century economy.

Que lastima! The broomtail is no longer monarch of the West, but hunting these cagey horses still provides a few modern mustangers with the same thrills experienced by the old-timers who really had good hunting.

Methods have changed little; we still follow the same pattern our dads and grandpaws used when they had to keep one eye peeled for hostile Indians.

While there are three different ways to catch wild horses, there are infinite

A Mustanger Must Be Half Horse Himself

variations of each, depending on the country, the weather, and the horses. There's no general rule that will enable a cowboy to catch any band no matter where he runs onto them—except that he be just a leetle smarter than the horses he's after!

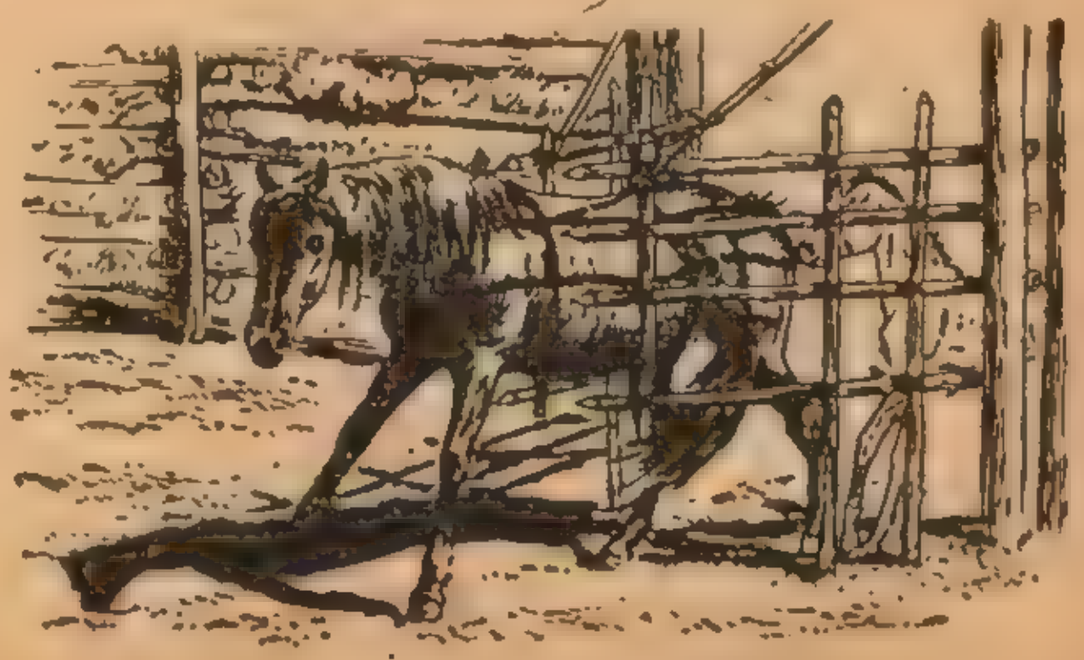
No wild-horse hunter can hope for success unless he's half horse himself! He's got to be able to think like the

mustangs he chases, and to react in the same way they do under almost any conditions.

One of the most sucessful ways of catching a wild bunch in open, flat country, where a man has little chance of running down the broomtails without killing a good saddle horse, is the walk-'em-down way. This can be done by a man afoot as well as ahorseback. The mustanger follows his band at a

leisurely pace for as many days as it takes to get them used to his presence —then it's fairly easy to spook them into the wings of a trap that's been built near their range.

Another common method is the use of the water trap. This consists of a stout corral built around a water hole in country where water is scarce. All other water holes in that range are either covered up or fenced off so the mustangs will have to water in the trap or leave their range. The trap is

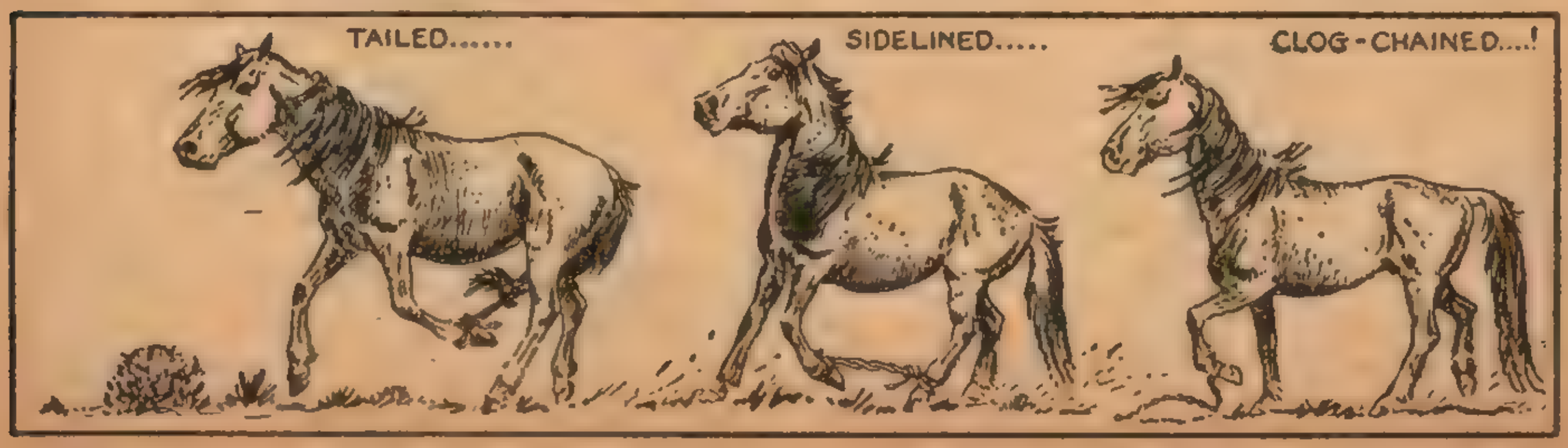


Water Trap

usually equipped with finger gates that will allow the horses to enter but prevent their leaving. The illustration shows a mare slipping into a water trap through such a gate.

The run-'em-down way is rough on horses and men, and often results in the loss of good saddle horses. One variation of this method is the relay system, where fresh men and mounts take up the chase at regular, planned intervals. Sometimes the wild 'uns are run into a band of gentle decoy

horses, who guide them into a corral or trap. Nothing beats the thrill of roping a wild horse in the open, but mighty few good ones are caught this way—they're fast enough to escape. The drawing below shows how the fuzztails are slowed down when they're ready to be taken from the trap or corral. Even with this handicap I've seen some that could fairly fly away from the bunch after they were started.



VAGABOND VAQUERO

Linda-perhaps went riding back fast toward the man on the spent bay horse.

A Novelette by L. L. Foreman

General Spook once told him that some folks are destined to live free and fast and die soon, but Dike Ladore aims to be respected and die of old age. Then—he meets Linda-perhaps.

Chapter One

Dust Devil

DIKE LADORE watered the buckboard team sparingly at the livery trough. He backed the horses from the trough, their muzzles dripping water, and walked them across to Stone Hall. The usual Saturday crowd of rigs and saddled horses filled the three hitchracks fronting the separate entrances of the hotel, barroom, and general store. Dike found space at the hotel gallery and tied up to the railing, taking a liberty that was ordinarily frowned on. He did it with a deliberate care.

The meticulous performance of his action stemmed from a tightening irritation. Today his forced patience strained under the watching eyes.

His feet struck the gallery floor lightly. His nod encompassed all the men idling there in the shade. Some of the men nodded sparely in return. None spoke to him. Those on the adjoining gallery of the barroom showed awareness of him, shifting back to let him pass. This uncovered Dall Robey, crew boss of the big Rocking Hill Ranch, occupying a barrel chair flanked by half a dozen Rocking Hill hands.

Robey must have reached town early, for he was already red-faced from drink. He made no move to pull in his sprawled legs. Dike Ladore stepped around them and paced on to the store, conscious as always of the secret amusement and curiosity lurking in Robey's eyes.

Ardelle Culverson came to the store door as he made to turn in. He pulled up, doffing his hat with the habitual touch of deft courtesy, the hinted elegance that helped set him apart from most men of this place. He stood before her, rakishly garbed in patched and hard-worn range clothes, lean and Spanish-dark in contrast to her rounded fairness, and said:

"Delle, is your father through yet? This town gets on my nerves."

She had bought one of the new parasols, a contraption of silk and collapsible wire ribs, called sun-umbrellas by people who knew no better. Unfamiliar with its workings, she fussed with it, trying to get it open.

"I do wish you would desist from calling me 'Delle,'" she rebuked him, giving the "desist" the slight emphasis that she reserved for newly acquired words. "Abbreviations are vulgar, Dike."

"Sorry. Forgot." He refrained from mentioning that he had been christened Vandyke. He took the parasol from her and snapped it open and handed it back, all in one flowing motion. It was white. Ardelle was partial to white, and she made a point of dressing correctly when coming to town. Her kind of virginal beauty required the absence of strong colors.

Along the Stone Hall gallery Dall Robey barked a guffaw. It may have

been aroused by the sight of a cowpuncher opening a silk parasol. It didn't bother Dike, but Ardelle glanced in that direction and saw the Culverson buckboard at the hotel railing. Her face stiffened and she inquired:

"Do you expect me to push through all those men? Really, Dike! It's vulgar!"

Her father came stamping out of the store, heavy-footed, solid. Fergus Culverson owned one of the smaller ranches of Bluejay Plains, but in ponderous dignity he stood in the foremost rank. His town suit of rusty black was a hallmark of unyielding respectability. He worshiped success, and had plodded paths of caution all his life without gaining much more than a pinched expression of chronic dissatisfaction.

Behind Culverson walked Marc Barthold, owner of Stone Hall and the Rocking Hill Ranch, the worthiest object of Culverson's worship, next to the Almighty. Tall and very thin, Barthold. A narrow, knife-nosed face that could break out an engaging smile. Large eyes with a level, kindly gaze. He dressed conservatively and lived a quiet bachelor's life in the big rock house next to Stone Hall. By popular request he had recently opened a small bank in the rear of his store, and his ready generosity in making loans was becoming famed.

Fergus Culverson saw where his buckboard stood and he had overheard his daughter's protest. He frowned weightily. "Why didn't you tie up here at the rack, man?" Somebody had just pulled out and left a space there.

Dike didn't argue. It would have been useless. Going to the buckboard, he said to himself without intentional blasphemy, "God give me strength!"

He wondered, not for the first time, if Culverson drew a kind of pious pleasure out of riding him. He worked for Culverson, at low pay, for the reason that nobody else was anxious to hire him. Culverson liked the cheapness, but disliked his personality and past reputation.

Dike led the team to the store hitchrack, and Culverson said, "There's a sack of stuff inside. Load it in."

"Yeah," Dike said. He thought, *Take it easy, now*, and he tied the team and stepped up onto the store gallery. Dall Robey was sending that same look at him, amused, curious. No Ladore man had ever been known to accept such orders. Was this last Ladore a papersack?

A dust devil hit the south end of the town, just as a rider rounded the trail-bend into the main street. Dike watched it whirling giddily, sucking up dust and stray bits of paper, casting them high over the town. This, then, was what had got into him today. The time of the dust devils always made him restless. It had usually been dust-devil time when the Ladores went plunging off into their wildest escapades. Old Man Jeff. Dad—Crazy Casey. Uncle Tom, Bad Jim, General Spook, and the rest. A mad bunch.

His pause on the store gallery was being watched. There was Culverson, intolerant-eyed. Barthold, gentle-mannered. The men on the long gallery. And Ardelle—shuttling her glance from him to the oncoming rider, thinking that he was looking at the rider because it was a girl and Ladore men were what they were.

He shortened his look to the rider, after the dust devil cycloned off. He recognized her as "the Blade girl"—it was the only name she was known by here around Newton, and that general-

ly sneered as an epithet by town and ranch folk. He had seen her a few times in the company of a bearded man who carried a rifle across his saddle.

The Blades, a clan of horse breeders and traders, had a bad name. Stock stealers. They camped in a valley somewhere up in the Fra Cristobals to the west. When any of them made the trip down into town they rode in armed, bought a few necessities, and immediately rode out again. A silent lot, outcasts by their own preference, enemies of authority, haters of towns and houses.

Today the Blade girl rode in alone. Even lacking the bad name, she would have drawn notice. She wore faded Levis and a flannel shirt, scuffed riding-boots and an old slouch hat. A braided quirt swung from her right wrist. Her saddle was stock, not a side-saddle, and in Newton that alone was fairly censurable. Her horse was a big bay that sidled and danced, distrustful of town sights and smells. Against the town-dressed women visible on the street, she stood out, carelessly disreputable. The women paid her no greeting and she offered them none.

The men on the barroom gallery talked, their attention now on her. Dike heard Dall Robey drawl, "Nice legs on that horse."

Aimed at any other girl, the stale double meaning of the remark would have aroused frowns. But the law of scrupulous respect for women turned up no champions this time. The Rocking Hill hands grinned. Other men pretended not to hear. And by that, the Blade girl fell into the pariah class.

Dike went on into the store, got Culverson's sack of goods from the clerk, and started out. He met the girl coming in and he stood aside for her to pass, tipping his hat. Her eyes flickered a momentary surprise at the courtesy. It was the closest he had been to her. Her eyes were not brown, as he had thought, but a dark blue as clear as deep amethyst. She was slim, not very tall; a well-knit quality held her body firm and straight. Her small face reflected fresh maturity emerging from urchin youthfulness. A ready sense of humor played around her lips. She inclined her head to Dike and they passed each other.

Outside, Barthold and Culverson talked together, Culverson diligently agreeable, Barthold glancing constantly at Ardelle. As Dike heaved the sack into the buckboard, Ardelle came over to him.

She had a way of bringing up spoken words for examination, after the reason for them was half forgotten, and she asked, "Why do you say this town gets on your nerves, Dike?" And without waiting for his reply she went on, "The fault is in yourself. You're so impatient. Restless. There's something about you that makes people doubt if you'll ever really settle down. You know it's so. You should try to—to desist, Dike. Really you should."

He leaned against a wheel of the buckboard, rolling a brown cigarette. The untamed look, the hawk look of the Ladores, edged his faint, wry grin. "They like to wonder. They like remembering that I come of a kind of wild breed. That I was a kid gambler when I first hit this town. They don't want to believe I can settle down."

The Blade girl had left her bay horse ground-reined outside the store. Dall Robey spoke to one of the Rocking Hill hands and the man came and led the bay up before the barroom gallery. Sit-

ting in kingly arrogance, Robey inspected it, nodding. "No brand. Stole, o' course. Those thievin' Blades do ride good horses."

Ardelle said, "Now, Dike, that's not true. Everybody knows you've worked harder and steadier for Father than any man he's ever had. But there's something about you—"

Dike nodded. "My name! Ladore. The Driftin' Kid. I had to live, after my Uncle Tom got killed. He was the last. Got it fightin' for General Sancho Medina. He liked Sancho. I was only sixteen then. I liked old Sancho, too. He made me a captain. Uncle Tom was a general, like General Spook—Uncle Pat—his brother. I made my way back up out o' Mexico with a monte deck an' his gun for copper. Pat got his at Matamoras."

"I do wish you would forget such stupid things."

"Me too, sometimes. *Tambien!*"

The Blade girl came out of the store carrying a partly filled sack. She looked at the vacant spot where she had left her horse, glanced around swiftly, and located it standing before the barroom. Her eyes flashed. She walked the full length of the gallery, elbowing men out of her way, and descended the saloon steps to the bay. The bay shot its ears at the sack and dug in a hind hoof, suspicious.

She spoke to it crisply. "Steady, Birnam! Steady!" She had some trouble tying the sack to the saddle, the bay shifting uneasily, disliking it.

On the gallery, Dall Robey drawled, "I'd buy that horse, maybe, if he's not stole too near here."

The girl looped a latigo and fastened the sack.

"Where was he lifted?" Robey pursued.

No answer. He heaved out of his chair. He trod the steps lazily, yet swiftly, and caught the bridle. "I asked you!"

The girl swung lithely up into the saddle, the split reins threaded through the fingers of her left hand. "Let go!" Her voice was quiet.

Dall Robey wagged his head at her. He was a big man, thick through, noted for his ability in handling animals and men. He said, "This is a stole horse. Somebody call the sheriff. Get off, gal!" He thrust the horse up, rearing, to topple its rider.

The girl stayed balanced perfectly in the saddle. She leaned forward and her quirt cracked on Robey's hand. Robey muffled a curse, snatched at the quirt with his free hand, and caught its end. He tore the quirt from the girl with one wide sweep of his arm. He struck at the bay with the butt of it, and the girl caught that in her hand. And then there they were both, tugging at the quirt while the bay danced and bucked like a bronc snubbed to a post.

"How vulgar!" breathed Ardelle. "How *un*utterably vulgar! That awful girl!"

The cigarette still in his lips, Dike moved away from the buckboard. He had no clear idea of doing anything, no defined purpose. He moved as if from habit, like when going through the motions of courtesy. He was unflurried as he said in a voice of chill calmness, "That's about enough, Robey!"

A gunshot could have stilled the street no quicker. Faces turned to him, somberly expectant, unsurprised. Sheriff Glover, bulking from his office in response to call, pulled up. The Rocking Hill men on the gallery craned

their necks like inquiring turtles.

Dall Robey stared at Dike, the secret amusement gone from his eyes, speculation replaced by certainty. He liked fighting. He asked, "You chippin' in here, Ladore?"

"That's right," said Dike.

Robey let go of the bay's bridle and quirt. "Come on!"

Fergus Culverson began an angry command. Marc Barthold stretched an arm across him and shook his head, and shook it again at Ardelle, whose mouth had opened to call Dike back. Barthold was Robey's employer and he was making it known that he wanted no interference with Robey's fight.

Dike walked to Robey. He pulled back his chin and let a fist graze by, and he hit Robey in the ribs and then over the ear. Robey scooped a foot out, falling, aiming for the groin. Dike straight-armed that foot and Robey plowed dirt. The Rocking Hill men piled off the gallery.

Robey rolled over in the street, gasping, expecting Dike's boots in his face. He clawed his gun out. While his thumb hooked the hammer, Dike jammed a heel down hard on his wrist. Dike stooped, twisted the gun free, and smacked the butt full between Robey's eyes. It was a short and dirty fight. Robey sagged into the dirt, his wrist crunched and his face bloody.

Dike flipped the gun end-over-end, exchanging barrel for butt. He cocked it in line with the Rocking Hill men. They hauled in, glaring at it, at him, a cold-eyed and dangerous man who had learned his fighting lessons in hard lessons in hard corners before he learned the alphabet.

He said, "That's about enough," in an even tone. And, when they hesitated, "Don't push me. Please." And the gracious note of courtesy crept in. They stood still, knowing then that he was all that they should have expected of a Ladore.

Culverson said furiously a minute later, "You're fired!" He scratched out a check on Barthold's bank for wages due, carefully deducting four days short of a month. Ardelle, hidden behind her white silk parasol, said nothing.

Dike stood watching the buckboard bowl out of town until it passed the trail-bend. There went respectability, stability, the important things that he had struggled to earn, believing that they might have the power to pull the Ladore name up out of disrepute.

He turned in to the store to cash the wage check. The Blade girl was gone. They were carrying Robey into the hotel and a man was running to Doc Clune's house.

He was waited on by Barthold, in person, and he hardly knew what to say to him, Robey being Barthold's man. But Barthold said sympathetically, "Too bad, Ladore. Culverson—well, you know how he is. What are your plans, may I ask?"

"Get another job. If I can."

Barthold folded his arms on the counter, watching Dike pick up his money. "That won't last you long. You worked for him for pennies. You're stubborn. He's certainly respectable. And Miss Culverson—"

"That's personal."

"Excuse me." Barthold dipped his head. "I was only going to say that I admire your good taste. I hope the young lady is not through with you. Is she?"

Dike shrugged. "She looked back at me. I guess it'll be all right if I get a steady job." He began liking Barthold.

Barthold shook his head concernedly. "Where? You beat Robey. Broke him. He was tough. That makes you tougher. They won't forget. They're afraid of you. They've been expecting you to do something like that, and you've done it. I'd get out if I were you."

"I'm staying."

"H'm." Barthold made a careful steeple of his fingers. "Robey's chief job on Rocking Hill was to keep the crew hammered in line. It's a hardcase crew. Their job entails protecting my stock from Mexicans in the south and the Blades on the west. Robey is out now. I'm short a good, tough crew boss."

"You offerin' me the job?"

"Yes. The pay is good." Barthold pointed a lean forefinger at the pocket where Dike had stowed his pay. "About six times that."

"You've hired a crew boss."

"Glad," said Barthold. "Glad to have you."

Chapter Two

Man Trap

DIKE had been in many bunkhouses, south and north of the Rio Grande. They were cheerful places where saddle-tired men relaxed and spread out. Often there was a smiling Mexican thrumming a battered guitar. Or somebody able to torture a banjo, while a friendly poker game went on. There was a big coffeepot on the stove, and the smell of leather and tobacco and some sweat.

A good place to be in, a bunkhouse, with men who knew what you were talking about when you spoke of Montana winters, Christmas in the warm sun of Sonora, the ice fields of Canada, and the wildflowers of old Santone.

Nothing of that brightened the Rocking Hill outfit. He was among taciturn men here who came in at all hours and crawled silently into their bunks. No friendliness here. These men weighed one another's words. When they fought, as cloistered men always fought on tiny provocation, it was viciously. With boots, knives, clubs. A hardcase crew, all right. The work seemed to run smoothly, though. Dall Robey had charge of the roundup. His path didn't cross Dike's often.

Dike's job was so easy, he felt that he was hardly earning his pay, until the night Barthold rode a sweat-lathered horse into the yard, calling, "Ladore! Where are you?"

Dike grabbed a lantern and hurried out. "Anything wrong?"

"Wrong? Hell's sake!" Barthold threw out a hand in an angry gesture. "You're supposed to know! That's your job! Those damned Blades are running south with a bunch of stolen horses! Get after 'em, man!" He wheeled his horse savagely and was gone.

Dike shouted to the men in the bunkhouse, "Saddle up an' get to Sombra Pass, quick! Horse thieves headin' south—the lava beds!" With Barthold's sharp reprimand stinging him, he sprinted to the corrals, saddled a horse, and took off southward without waiting for the men.

He passed Buffalo Butte, skirted the Sink—still on Rocking Hill range—and guessed the men couldn't be far behind by now. It was a rustler's night, moonless, dark. He sniffed the air and smelled dust, and the tang was fresh. Animals had passed this way very re-

cently. He pushed on, soon beginning to hear sounds—hoofs beating, occasionally a thin shout.

Slanted slabs of blackness appeared. The lava beds. The riders and the band of horses were making slow time through the pass, a difficult and winding route even in daylight.

He came upon them abruptly, shadows moving in the dark, and he pulled his gun. He fired twice, to serve the additional purpose of letting the following Rocking Hill riders know that he had caught up and was needing them.

A tall rider ahead swerved, shouting. Others cut off after him, vanishing into the black lava beds like ghosts in flight. The abandoned bunch of horses milled around, startled by Dike's shots, then dashed on through the pass. Dike rode after them, talking and crooning to them, letting them know that he wasn't a spook.

Riders pounded up behind him. Some of them drew abreast of him. He called, "Take it easy! We're doin' fine!"

A voice beside him rasped, "We sure are, brother!" And a heavy gun-barrel blow knocked him out of his saddle.

He hit the ground hard, rolling, floundering. A furious and amazed indignation brought him sitting up, swearing, in the dirt. A rider dismounted, whirled to him, kicked him quickly in the jaw. It was Dall Robey, saying grittily, "I got him!" He kicked again. And again.

A LIGHT WAS WHAT DIKE SAW when he dragged his eyes open. They had built a fire. The horses stood quietly shivering. The men, too, stood quietly: Marc Barthold, Fergus Culverson, Dall Robey, and the Rocking Hill crew. And Sheriff Glover.

The sheriff, seeing Dike's eyes open, said gravely, "Ladore, you're under arrest. Horse-stealing." He looked into the fire, not proud of his company.

Dike said puzzledly, "Why, I never took a horse but once. In Mexico." He was thinking of Uncle Tom and all the rest, not remembering that they were dead.

Dall Robey laughed. "You hear, Culverson? He lifts your horses. We catch him. An' that's what he says! Glover, you better put them handcuffs on him. He put up a hell of a tussle tryin' to get away from me."

Dike struggled up, fighting a sick weakness. "Barthold! You know it's not so! You rode in an' warned me the Blades were runnin' some stolen horses south. I set out after 'em. All these men heard you. They were in the bunkhouse."

The Rocking Hill men eyed him in sneering silence. The sheriff murmured something respectfully to Barthold.

Barthold shook his head, saying coldly, "You'll have to think up something better, Ladore! I haven't seen you since I hired you. The men haven't seen you since before sundown, when you rode off without leaving word where you were going. I suppose I should have guessed you were in with the Blades, when you took up for that girl, but I'm not a suspicious man. I gave you a chance to make good. It's plain what happened tonight. You helped the Blades run off Culverson's horses, for spite and profit! They got away. You didn't, thanks to Robey!"

"You damned liar!" Dike said.

Dall Robey drew his gun. He brought the barrel down on Dike's head. "Keep your tongue civil, horse thief!"

Dike barely heard the beginning of Sheriff Glover's protest.

HE CAME TO IN THE NEWTON JAIL, lying on a narrow cell bunk, his punished head and face one great blinding pain.

Sheriff Glover, not an unkindly man as long as it didn't peril his official standing, told him, "You're here till court convenes an' that's three months off, so make y'self comfortable as you can, boy. Culverson's Mexican wrangler died. You shoot too good! The charge is murder an' robbery. Want some coffee?"

Dike rested his throbbing head in his hands. "They're lying—Barthold an' all his crew. I didn't even know the horses were Culverson's. Thought they were Barthold's."

"Well—" The sheriff moved away from the barred door of the cell. He was old in the knowledge of young men's wild vices, and he said pityingly, "We all make mistakes. Tell me if you want anything. I'll be on tap most days. Clark, my deputy, he'll be on nights. Clark's all right, I guess, you meet him halfway."

Clark was not all right, and he didn't want to be met any part of the way. They called him Cold-Jaw Clark. He had been a dance-hall bouncer in Tombstone until he hit a drunken cowpoke too fatally hard and was advised to change pastures.

"A road agent I can abide," Cold-Jaw Clark informed Dike. "A bank robber I can almost respect. But a murderin' low-down horse thief—Gawd! Don't you bother me for a damn thing! Hear?"

"I hear you," said Dike. "I also smell you. Don't fret, hydrophobia, I don't want you near me!"

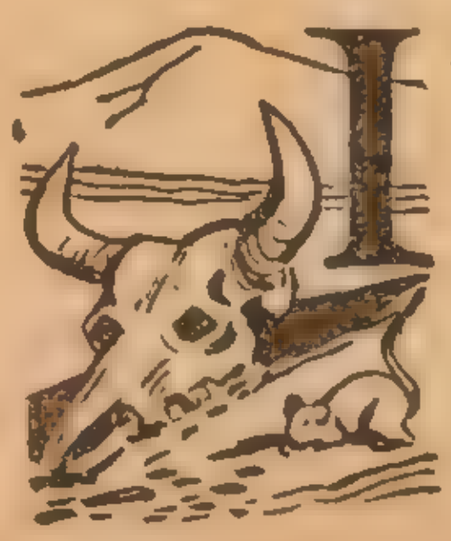
The deputy scowlingly squirted tobacco juice into the cell and departed to the front office, leaving Dike to contemplate the picture of himself on a gallows after the judge pronounced sentence. As the judge certainly would. Twelve good men and true of Newton on the jury, grimly listening to Rocking Hill witnesses swear his life away. A short trial, unhindered by any testimony for the defense.

He tested the bars on the single open window. They were held rigid in an iron frame. Even without that, the window was too small to squeeze through. Some men walked past, going through the side alley to the livery corral. They glimpsed his face at the barred window. One of them scooped up a handful of gravel and flung it at him.

He sat down on the hard bunk, wiping his face. He was as friendless, he guessed, as a man could get. There was a sour humor in that. He could imagine the hard-bitten grins of the dead Ladores. Of that untamed tribe he was the only one ever to reach for respectability—and he had fallen far shorter of it than any of them.

CHAPTER THREE

Skulls in the Wind



IN THE night he lay listening to the infrequent clack of boots on a boardwalk, the beat of a departing rider, and now and then a rise of voices in the Stone Hall barroom down the street.

Newton was anything but a wide-

open town. Noisy frolics at late hours were discouraged. The Bluejay country was long settled and its inhabitants inclined toward a sense of superiority over footloose folk from rawer, cruder places. Gamblers and other strays from paths of rectitude, happening to hit Newton, soon left for parts where life ran to a faster tempo.

For that reason Dike had chosen Bluejay as the place to carve a respected niche for himself. He couldn't have picked a tougher one for his purpose, but the Ladores never did anything by halves.

He listened also to Dall Robey and Cold-Jaw Clark in the sheriff's office out front. They evidently were friends of a sort. Robey had come in an hour ago, and soon there was the slap of cards and a clinking of glasses. Their voices carried down the short corridor to the cell. Dike heard them discussing him.

"If I'd had my way I'da chilled him for good, I can tell you! But the boss said no."

"Would've saved time an' county money. I got no use for a dirty horse thief." It took a two-bit thug like Clark, swollen with an ounce of officialdom, to be so self-righteous.

"The boss, though, he's kinda comin' round to my mind about it. Long time before trial. Too long."

Dike tightened his attention, wondering suddenly whether Robey's visit was casual or had been directed by Barthold. The words and tone were not aimless. Dike heard him say next, "The boss thinks you'd make a better sheriff than Glover. He told me. You could count on him next election, maybe."

Bait to enlist Clark's aid? A long time before trial. Something might go wrong in three months. Barthold, perhaps, was considering the risks of unforeseeable accidents. Men drinking, spilling an unguarded remark. Witnesses fumbling over their false testimony in court, after the lapse of three months.

Clark said, "That's right nice o' Mr. Barthold. I'll do anything for him, anytime. You tell him, Dall, huh?"

"Sure will. Somethin's due to come up soon. You be ready."

Dike sat motionless. He knew now, as well as if it had been shouted, what Robey's object was in dropping in on the deputy tonight. Barthold had decided that he couldn't afford to wait, and Robey was here to lay out the ground for a quicker end to the affair.

A faint rustle roused Dike from gray reflections. He thought it a pack rat, and he slid his feet to scare it away. Then it occurred to him that there was no entrance for a rat, except the door and window. He fired a match. The floor was empty.

Letting the match fall, he caught a shifting glint at the window. He stared at it, at something humped between the bars. He rose from the bunk, clapped a hand on it, and it came free; he had a gun by the barrel.

For a moment he stood there, baring his teeth in a dismal grin. Slip him a gun that wouldn't shoot, and brace him into trying to use it. Old Sancho's way with prisoners too hot to hold. Funny how Sancho fell for that same trick, in the San Felipe fortress. General Spook, though, used his to club his way out to the yard, lugging Sancho, but they got him on account of the wall and his wooden leg.

Dall Robey had spied the flare of the match, and he muttered something to Clark. The deputy responded, "Aw,

he's smokin', I reckon." For all his willingness to give service in Barthold's interest, Clark wasn't being too bright. The whisky, perhaps.

Robey said positively, "Somethin's wrong! Let's look."

Dike shoved the gun under the back of his belt, out of sight. The same old pattern. Robey wouldn't improve on it. Brace the victim. Make him draw. Then the perfectly legal and justifiable killing.

And still Clark didn't catch on. "Just smokin'."

"I said we'll look!" rapped Robey, and chairs scraped.

Robey came first, carrying the lamp. He stared stonily through the barred door.. The healed dent between his eyes gave him a lasting frown.

"Ain't smokin'!" he told Clark brusquely. "Go on in. Find what he's grinnin' about!" He laid his right hand on his holster. "I'm watchin' him!"

He waited in the short corridor while Clark unlocked the cell door and entered. He eased his gun up and down, sliding it impatiently in its holster, and his eyes took on a blank glare.

As soon as Clark touched Dike, the false yell of warning rang out: "Watch him! He—"

Dike grabbed Clark's arms. He slung Clark half around, seeing only the flickered reflection of Robey's gun-blast. Clark mumbled surprisedly and fell against him. Robey fired again, the sound enormous under the low roof, and swore at Clark. Dike let Clark slide through his arms to the floor and sank down with him, but he couldn't reach the deputy's gun.

He tore the gun from the back of his belt. Robey, in the corridor outside the cell, was safe from clubbing. Dike took aim and said for bluff, "Drop your shooter!"

Robey swerved, the lamp guttering in his left hand, and leveled off for another shot. Reaction caused Dike to pull trigger. The roar of his gun amazed him. There was nothing wrong with it and it was loaded. He fired a second time.

Robey threw out his thick arms. His gun clanked across the cell bars. The lamp smashed against them and flared smokily. He bowed over, groping at the bars, trying to straighten up. He failed, sliding down them.

Dike stepped over Clark, stepped over Robey, and was in the corridor. Five steps and he was in the front office. The front door hung open to let in the night breeze. He eased on out, gun in hand. A few men plunged out of the Stone Hall barroom, wheeling as they struck the boardwalk, running toward the jail. Rocking Hill men. Lights sprang up in the windows of Barthold's house. The shots had wakened the town.

And Dike reverted to Ladore type, shooting his way out. He slung a bullet that grooved the boardwalk fronting Stone Hall and sent the running men out into the street. His next kicked up dust, driving them over to the far side. He ducked down the side alley, for a saddled horse stood there, ground-reined by the jail toward the rear. A big bay.

He vaulted into the saddle, drew up the reins, and the bay took off beautifully. No bucking or shying, no fooling around. The big bay just stretched out and ran as if that was all it had been waiting to do. The kind of horse that bronc-accustomed men dreamed of riding in heaven.

He cleared town in a boil of dust,

westward. Against the few lights of Newton he made out, looking back, the bobbing blobs of riders lashing hard after him. He laughed aloud. The Ladore laugh. They couldn't catch up, those nags, with this splendid prince of a horse.

He didn't know much about the westward country out of Bluejay, and soon he tangled in a criss-cross maze of arroyos gashing down out of the Fra Cristobals. The bay kept pulling north, a direction that Dike didn't want. The northern routes would be haunted by cattle inspectors, range detectives, and local lawmen, checking over the men and animals of the trail herds heading up to the railroad. He'd be spotted as a longrider on the fast dodge. His course would be reported up and down the line. So he fought the bay westward, and lost time searching for crossings in the dark over arroyos too wide to jump.

The Newton pursuers split into two groups, which raised a nagging trouble in his mind. They knew the country. They were avoiding the mistakes that he was making. By daylight he could have outdistanced them handily, watching the country ahéad. In the dark it was a matter of riding blindly into one obstacle after another, with the angry feeling growing that he was jamming into a jackpot.

Glancing off to his left, it came as a shock to him to find one of the groups sky-lining higher ground not more than a half-mile distant, almost abreast of his line of flight. Those riders loped along without pause, meeting no obstacle unknown to them.

He swung away reluctantly toward the north. So did they, on a wider angle, as though knowing where to head him off. They spread out. The bay shied at the edge of an arroyo, planted its legs, and skeltered half around. It, now, was in country that it didn't know, didn't like, miles off the trail that it had wished to take. It was as lost as its rider.

Dike looked down into a forty-foot sheer drop. This was the largest he had come upon as yet, cut by flash floods streamed into it from smaller arroyos. The ordinary procedure was to follow it up to higher ground where it was bound to shallow out, but the Newton riders were cruising down from there. This, he guessed, was where they had known that he would be stopped. The core of his trouble hardened and grew. He pressed the bay along the high bank, following the big arroyo downward, figuring that it had to cut somewhere into Ravine River.

The riders came whooping after him. He speculated on the whereabouts of the rest of that bunch, until a drumming broke out on the right and answered the question with pitiless fact. Now he saw them, pounding over a slant of ground. He saw where the deepening arroyo made juncture with the river, dead ahead.

The land there formed a blunt point like the corner of a table, tilted high, and stark despair wrenched him. That was his destination. On that point both groups of riders were converging, harrying him before them, driving him to the last inch of the hopeless trap that he had entered by pushing west. The bay had known better.

The trap was closed when he reached the point of land, the two groups of riders loosely joined and coming steadily at him. Calaveras Point. He had heard of it. The bay halted there and spun around, hind heels scrabbling

stones that went bouncing in lengthening arcs down a shelving, rock-strewn precipice. What appeared from up here as a trickle of water far below was the river, a gorge here, on its last roaring leap from the mountains before flowing tamely through Bluejay Plains.

Dike slid from the saddle, flung the reins over it, gave the bay a farewell slap. The faces of the oncoming riders reminded him of a string of skulls that he had seen in a crazy Yaqui camp below the Rio, swinging in the wind, blurred by the night. He tugged the gun from his belt. He stood waiting to spend the one shell left in the gun, and that reminded him of Tops Bob. But Tops, he'd had a .44-40 rifle and a pair of 'shooters, and he made a hell of a fight against Kansas Frank's mob before standing up with his last load. Still, it ended the same. It always did.

Maybe it was as General Spook said once when in a deeply philosophical mood built on tequila. There were some folks who had to live free and fast, and they naturally couldn't expect to live as long as other kinds of folks. You had to be what you were, and take the penalties along with the rewards. General Spook had a word to cover it all, that he said he got from the Arabs. He had been everywhere. The word was *mektoob*—meaning, "So be it," and usually he added, "And the hell with it."

Dike fired his shot into the closing pack of riders, and muttered, "*Mektoob*, and the hell with it."

Gunfire crashed a dozen spears of flame under the string of bobbing skulls. It punched him, drove him tottering backward. For an instant, on the brink of Calaveras Point, he caught himself, stood straight.

A voice yelled something savagely. The firing splashed the night again.

He toppled back down the canyon wall of the river.

Chapter Four

Camp of the Condemned

HE WAS mad, stark mad. A mouthing, fighting lunatic in chains. The chains rattled sadly whenever he moved. And movement was agony that punished and stamped him back down into the pit of blessed unconsciousness, screaming.

Then again, over and over, senses would persistently call him back. He had to obey, cursing, wishing for death. *Nirvana*, General Spook had called it. The painless peace. The endless sleep.

His broken body was the enemy, torturing him. Its masses of bandages—the chains, damn them, held him from clawing the bandages off. He knew that he was a madman, hearing sometimes his own voice cursing in Mexican and English and Indian, raving of things that were forgotten. Yet the forefront of his memory carried on a separate struggling existence of its own.

He could remember clearly that moment when, the morning sun blazing in his eyes, he found that he was wedged against a boulder that, it turned out, overhung a straight drop to the river. He had tumbled a long way, too far down for anybody to find him. He remembered the slow crawling. Not all of it. Only fogged shreds. Sometimes in the heat of the day. Sometimes in the shivering chill of night.

"Where am I now?" he snarled whisperingly, and moved. The chains rattled, and pain twisted and ground the senses from him. It happened time and time again.

Gradually, he grew aware of a voice answering quietly his repeated question. And of a hand touching him. A cool damp cloth wiping the sweat of pain and weakness from his face. The touch was so gentle, and he so accustomed to it now, it began to worry him that he was never quite sure whether it was there or not. He relied on it, swearing insanely when knowing that it was absent, knowing of the presence of intruders, strangers, men who spoke and trod hushedly.

One day he opened his eyes and was conscious without cursing. Without straining at the chains. In almost idle curiosity he looked at the ceiling and walls. Logs chinked with adobe. Unpeeled logs. Termites and wood ants would get under the bark and bore the logs rotten in a few years. But maybe the folks didn't plan to stay. That was all right.

A face hovered above him. It was, he noted carefully, a small and well-formed face. The eyes gazing down gravely into his own were dark blue, clear as deep amethyst.

He said, "You're—" and stopped from saying, "the Blade girl." Instead, he asked, "What's your name?" And a touch of the habitual courtesy, the Ladore gallantry, got into his tone. It seemed natural and not at all surprising that she should be the one of the gentle hand.

She closed her eyes as if in prayer. She opened them and said, "The Blade girl." Her voice had the quiet, soft sibilance of Spanish at its best, though there was no accent. "My name," she told him, "is Melinda."

"Melinda," he mused aloud. He felt strangely at ease with her, yet was astonished at his jet of excitement. "Linda, perhaps?"

She bowed her head to him. "Linda." Her hair, deep bronze, fell across her face. "Perhaps."

"My name is Dike Ladore," he told her, and she nodded as if she knew that. The weakness undid him then. He couldn't keep his eyes on her. In blinking, he fell asleep.

She was there when he woke again. Only later, thinking of her, did he realize that her face was drawn weary to exhaustion. In reply to his queries she told him patiently what she had told him many times. He was in the Blade camp, in an unnamed valley of the Fra Cristobals.

"If you had given my horse his head, he would have brought you here. You must have fought him, to get him into the *arroyos malos*. But you didn't know." Her eyes smiled down on him. "Calaveras Point is a bad place. You should have trusted Birnam."

"Yes," he agreed. "I didn't know. I lost your horse."

She shook her head. "Birnam came home. Then we went looking for you. We found you." Her smile transcended her exhaustion. "In Newton they say you're shot to rags. Gone down forever. The last Ladore. Your body fed the fish of Ravine. Your bones drift south to the Rio and the Gulf."

"When was that, Linda-perhaps?"

"Nearly three months ago. You've been—sick. Mano, the blacksmith, made your chains. He will cut them off. Ho, Mano!"

Mano came and cut Dike's chains. He did it with a chisel in one hand, a heavy sledge in the other. He was a

swarthy giant with childlike eyes.

"My iron never breaks," he said with pride. "Even holding such a one. Such a one, Melinda, eh? Such a wild man! I strike him free—so!" The hammer fell and the chains fell.

"He is free, Melinda. Yet watch him." The childlike eyes surveyed Dike calmly. "*Señor*, I can kill you so easy!"

"Yes, Mano," said Dike. He fell back to Spanish. "Mano, I hold no harm toward thee."

"To me?" asked Mano. His massive muscles rippled. "That would be nothing. Have no harm, friend, toward Melinda!" He lowered his shaggy great head and padded out.

To Melinda, Dike said, "There is love here for you."

She colored and said, "Love has many paths. The path which is right for one may be wrong for another."

"*Mektoob!*"

"You know that word? It is fatalism. The hand that wrote us our lives is not unkind. I don't believe it! I am a young woman. The healthy desires in me were not put there by Satan, but by the One who said that man should not live alone—nor woman, I take it."

"Linda-perhaps," Dike said huskily. "Will you kiss me?"

She kissed him. Warmly. After which, she bathed him. Primly. With prosaic care.

He met the Blade men. They already knew him, in Mano's chains, for three months in their hidden camp. He shook hands with Old Feen, head of the clan, the bearded man whom he had seen escorting Melinda to town. And Gally, superb horseman, a lean-to-skeleton man whose hand was as hard as steel. Erris, Heyne, Turl, and others.

They all had smoothly muscular frames, coppery hair, calm and compelling eyes. Their manners were gentle, courteous. They made Dike think of panthers. As time ribboned on and he grew able to move about among them, he felt more at ease with them than he had ever been since successive disasters had wiped out the Ladores and left him solitary.

He understood their silences, their laconic comments and sudden spurts of dry humor. And they his. His strength flowed back, for he was of a tough and wiry breed, and he helped with the horses, of which there was a large number.

Most of the Blade horses were fine bays, like Melinda's Birnam. These were attended scrupulously, curried and inspected every day. "Racers and jumpers," Gally told Dike in his brief and taciturn fashion. "Our own strain. Bred from the same old line that produced the Irish Hunter."

Dike nodded appreciatively. "That long head. I saw one once. Up in Canada. It sold for three thousand dollars, and I broke my heart."

Gally grinned quickly. "I know. Any of these beauties will sell for that and more. To the right buyers. To those who know. We're careful who we sell to."

"You should be. You wouldn't part with your children to folks you don't know."

"True, Dike. Most true."

"And the folks down there—" Dike swept an arm—"call you stock thieves. Ah, the fools!"

"Aye. Fools."

It was Old Feen, returned with Melinda from the weekly trip to Newton, who spoke to Dike more fully. "We'll be moving on soon," Old Feen said. "I came near shooting a storekeeper today." His bushed eyes glittered. "He

wouldn't wait on Melinda. This country's got too hostile. You'll be pulling out with us, Dike." It was a statement, not a question.

"Well—I haven't thought about it."

"Look, boy! You're pretty much like us. Not made to stay too long in one place, like a vegetable. I've known two-three Ladores, here an' there. I was at Matamoras. I saw you an' the Gen'ral make that stand in the canefield. Hell! You can't fight the blood in you, whatever 'tis."

"I'm part Spanish," Dike remarked. "Some Indian."

Nodding, Old Feen scanned him. "An' God knows what else! Like us," Old Feen continued. "Us Blades. Spanish, black Irish, red highland Scot. My great-grandmother was called Culengro, a gypsy name. Blood of rebels and wanderers and good vagabonds. We can't all be stay-at-homes. It'd be a dull world."

It was made bluntly plainer to Dike that evening by Mano. Mano joined him silently where he sat smoking outside the cabin that he occupied next to Melinda's. Mano was not a Blade, but a blood relative of some kind. His name and coloring suggested strongly a good deal of Mexican heritage, oddly at variance with his immense blacksmith's build and childlike eyes of milky gray. As usual, Mano carried a hammer, a heavy sledge, as other men might idly carry a stick.

Mano squatted on his heels, facing Dike, and said in his gentle voice, "We break camp. We move on. *Por Dios!* Again! We wish you to go with us."

"Thanks," Dike said. "There's a certain matter, though, Mano, that calls me to Newton."

Mano's level look was opaque. "Melinda's gun saved you from jail." He spoke in Spanish. "Melinda's horse you rode. Melinda slipped into town alone that night. She led us to search for you when her horse came back without you. She nursed you back to life. Night and day, Melinda cared for you."

He shut his eyes tightly and whispered, "*Vida mia!* I will not let you hurt Melinda!"

"I wouldn't hurt her for the world," Dike vowed.

Mano rose, the sledge grasped in one great fist. "If you do, I will come after you. *Señor*, I will find you. I will kill you," he sighed.

After dark, Melinda found Dike pacing up and down. She backed away from him as he stepped toward her, and she spoke to him rapidly.

"I know what Mano said to you, Dike. I heard. Believe me, it was not my wish. No man should ever be forced by threats into—into a girl's arms. And surely no girl could want such a man. You are free to go, Dike. At any time. I will help you."

He started to speak. She raised her hand and said, "No, listen! I haven't told you of what's been happening down there. You never asked. I was glad not to tell you. But now I've got to. There's been an increase of horse-stealing. We're blamed, of course. All the Bluejay ranchers are stirred up. Barthold has organized what he calls a vigilante posse. Rocking Hill men. We think we know what he's after. Our horses! The Blade bays! We're so hated now, and he's so powerful. Nobody would challenge his right to them. We're outlaws here. It's time we moved on."

"It sure is," Dike nodded. "Any idea when he'll uncork?"

"Anytime, after tonight. He's been kept busy making preparations for the

big wedding."

"Whose wedding?"

She hesitated. "Marc Barthold is marrying Ardelle Culverson tonight."

Dike uttered a strangled grunt. "So that's the reason he framed me! To get *her!* I've got to stop him! In the name of decency, I've got to!"

Melinda bowed her head. She said tonelessly, turning away, "I'll saddle Birnam. I'll get Turl's guns. Go down to the oak near the spring in half an hour. Good-by, Dike—"

Chapter Five

Death at the Feast

HE COULD not travel on and leave behind in Newton a tragedy in the making along with the wreckage of his own hopes, Dike told himself, riding Birnam down the foothills into Bluejay Plains. A man had always to live with his conscience, the teammate of memory. The burning mark of failure demanded the salve of self-respect at whatever cost. Many a hopelessly lost cause was well worth the battle, and the dying defeated could smile tranquilly at the haunted scowl of the victor.

A small thunder rumbled below, and he drew in to piñon shadow to watch a band of horses go tearing south, some riders yipping along behind. Queer, he thought, for horses to be choused around so hard at night. The dust of their passing cleared quickly in the breeze. He was about to drop on down when a second bunch streamed from the north, raced by in the tracks of the first, and vanished. While he listened to the fading drumming, he

caught the sound of another run farther east on the plains.

He listened further, head bent, ears strained. Hell, the night was alive with bands of running horses. Raising his head, he saw now a faint glow climbing up on the east horizon, red like the rising moon seen through dust. He touched up the bay with his boots and rode headlong for Newton.

When he entered the main street, slowing the bay to a trot, he had the strange feeling of revisiting a scene from some former life. This was the town where he had sought hard to build a life for himself, and it had defeated and smashed him; yet now he was indifferent about it.

Rigs and saddled horses filled the street and overflowed into the livery corral and open weed lots. Barthold's big rock house, alongside Stone Hall, shed bright light from every window. The open front door exposed a jam of people, most of them craning their necks to witness what was occurring inside.

Dike found a place for the bay behind the livery corral. While he looped the reins over a fence pole the jam of people at Barthold's door loosened, suddenly noisy with talk and laughter. Sweating in their town clothes, cowmen and a few homesteaders and their

women came out panting for a breath of fresh air, but the bulk of the crowd remained in the house. The self-conscious joviality that bloomed at the conclusion of a wedding ceremony raised their voices to loudness.

In their preoccupation not many paid attention to Dike, passing through them into the house. A few sent him curious glances, seeing him closer in the light, a shabby range tough with a bearded, scarred face, stalking composedly in as if he had a special invitation. Only two or three took startled notice of the pair of guns holstered at his hips, and turned to frown after him. Weapons worn to a wedding was bad etiquette. A gun might be carried in the waistband under a buttoned coat, but not in plain sight. Apt to perturb the groom.

In the main room the air was stifling, made so by many lamps and the crowd. All Bluejay Plains appeared to have come to Barthold's wedding. Barthold was doing it up right, and must have invited everybody within fifty miles. Tables were stacked generously with liquor and cigars. Mexican women with loaded trays lined the passage leading from the kitchen, waiting smilingly to serve the guests.

Pushing through, Dike reached a corner from which he could view the center of attraction. Ardelle, he granted, was truly a beautiful, radiant bride. Her imported gown must have cost a mortgage, and the sparkle on her finger represented more than a cowpuncher could earn in half a dozen summers. Fergus Culverson, hovering behind her, beamed like a prospector who had finally struck it rich.

Marc Barthold was accepting the congratulations due him from everybody present. His narrow face wore its most kindly and engaging smile. His large eyes gazed levelly into the face of every handshaker, conveying to each one the flattering impression that his good wishes were particularly prized.

Searching the crowd, Dike picked out Barthold's store and saloon employees, but only three Rocking Hill men. He located the three before he spoke. They stood near Barthold. The three—Navvy Canfield, Rick Nash, Sturven—were watching him carefully, wondering about him. They had been among those who framed him, but there was no recognition of him in their faces.

He called out, "Lot o' you folks here are goin' to be afoot tomorrow," and he saw Barthold swing around, frowning. "There's a horse raid on, a clean sweep!"

Barthold said in a wry tone, filling the sudden hush, "Some joker is trying to break up the party, I think." He nodded to Canfield. "Throw him out!" And he turned back, superbly self-possessed, to shake hands with another guest.

Dike moved his head in slight warning to Canfield. People who had been pressed close to him shifted off, staring at him, muttering resentment. Then he had space and they all could see his gun belts.

He said, "Couple of outfits have been set afire. Get out where it's dark an' you'll see the glares."

He heard some men nearest the door hurry out. Barthold spoke to Canfield, who was stepping past him, and Canfield halted but kept his eyes fixed on Dike. Nash and Sturven unbuttoned their town coats. Dike spared a glance at Ardelle, sorry for her. He looked straight into her eyes and saw her lips

open slowly.

The men who went outside began shouting in tight, urgent tones. Their message was relayed by a man at the door: "Fires! He's right!"

"Hold it, everybody! Let's keep our heads!" Barthold raised a commanding hand and brought a pause to the crowd's beginning rush to the door. His eyes found Dike's. "It's the Blades again! I'll clean them out for this! The Blades, isn't it?" He was demanding Dike's confirmation. And Canfield came prowling on for threat, Nash and Sturven flanking him.

Sheriff Glover shouldered into the room. Dike spoke to him. "Stolen horses being pushed south, Sheriff. Hundreds! Still time to catch 'em at Sombra Pass, you hurry. They've got to slack up to funnel 'em through there."

He looked back at Barthold, and said edgedly, "Too bad your Rocking Hill vigilantes aren't on tap right now to lend a hand. Where are they, Barthold? Not here!"

The query seeped in. Even Culverson looked around for Rocking Hill faces that had not been missed in the big crowd.

Ardelle's lips moved, and Culverson bent his head, asking testily, "What? What?" His eyes popped. "No! Marc! She's saying he's Dike Ladore!"

Sheriff Glover, brushing unessentials aside, raised a peremptory voice. "Everybody here who can fish up a gun and ride—come on!"

Dike started edging toward the door, and stopped. The press there was too great, men piling out and the women following. Canfield, he thought thinly, would not be stayed from shooting by the presence of the women, regardless of hazard and panic. Barthold had passed him the nod now.

He put his back to the wall, thinking of trading a shot with Canfield and trying for the nearest window. If it were only Canfield. But there were Nash and Sturven. And Barthold.

He thought, *Barthold has got a gun on him somewhere. He means to use it. He's got the look.*

The Stone Hall hirelings were slipping out with the crowd. They weren't for fighting. Rocking Hill men were for that.

He thought the less of Barthold for not sending Ardelle away at once, and the better of Fergus Culverson for taking Ardelle's arm and guiding her off. There would always be darkly troubled questions in Culverson's mind after this. He might even realize that he had sold his daughter.

Impatient anger stiffened Dike's face to a wintry hardness. He said to Canfield, because Canfield was foremost, "All right. Now." And he put his hands down and a little to the rear.

Canfield studied him measuringly. He worked his tongue in an empty space where a tooth had been, chin drawn crooked and lips twisted. A man in speculation. "Well," he said, and whipped the gun from under his coat. The gun exploded a shell while the barrel arched around, faster than seemed possible. A lightning cross-draw.

Dike fired on the blast of it, his shoulders hitting the wall behind him. He settled there against the wall, aware of screams and commotion among the women at the door. His left-hand gun boomed at Nash next, past Canfield who said tightly, "I got you, anyhow," and dropped to his knees.

Sturven sank behind Canfield and loosed two shots fast over his ear. Can-

field cursed him wearily.

Nash fell at once, throwing his gun across the floor, gray-faced. He was out of it, the thrown gun meant, and he crawled out of line of Sturven. Sturven grasped Canfield up, using him for cover, and fired once more. Dike bumped the wall again, steadied, and took aim.

His bullet struck Sturven's gun hand and knocked it down. He started forward, but deprived of the wall's support, he reeled. He backed up against the wall, raising his eyes to Barthold. And he felt himself going down, trying desperately to stay up and lift his guns. For Barthold held a two-barreled pocket pistol pointed at him. A two-shot .44 derringer, guaranteed death at ten paces.

"You," said Barthold bitterly, "are the damnedest Jonah! Now die, will you?" He walked forward. "You've bothered me too long, man."

A window crashed and there was Mano, springing up off the floor, a bit of broken window frame caught in his shirt, glass in his shaggy black hair, the sledge in his hand. Mano padded toward Dike, saying softly, "I told you, Dike. I have found you."

He was immense in the room. A giant, his childlike eyes terrifying in their placid purpose. He sighed, swinging up the sledge, and glanced incuriously at Barthold.

Barthold, his mouth an open cave of fright, fired the derringer at him. Mano looked down at the hole punched in his chest, at the welling blood, puzzled and inquiring. Shaking his massive head reprovingly at Barthold, he wagged the sledge.

Barthold took short aim at him, his large eyes scared. Mano frowned. He tottered, hurled his hammer, and Dike heard the thud of it. The floor shook then from Mano's fall. Then quietness.

DIKE CAME TO in a bed in the hotel. Culverson was there, and Sheriff Glover, Doc Clune and some others. It was some time before Dike could make out what Culverson was trying to convey to him.

"They were Rocking Hill men," Culverson told him. "Glover and the rest crowded 'em in Sombra Pass. There was some shooting and some men got hurt, and then they gave up. Most of the horses are back now where they belong."

Sheriff Glover outlined a broader picture. "Barthold used his wedding for the time to pull it, everybody in town. Can you beat it? His own wedding! Sure—they couldn't finish roundup without horses. And most of 'em owing him money. He'd have their horses, their property, even their backing to raid the Blades and take *their* horses! Man! Well, he's dead. Your big Blade pal took care o' that. He's dead too, sorry to say. Anytime those Blades want anything around here, they only got to ask."

Culverson, when the others cleared out, coughed and said, "Ardelle wants to see you." He plucked at his lower lip, already sizing the future. "Y'know, she gets his property. Barthold's. As his widow. She'll need a good, strong, steady man. To take hold. I'm getting along in years, Dike. Doubt I could handle it, that big Rocking Hill Ranch, the store and saloon and bank and all. Y'know?"

"Sure," Dike said, "I know. Let me sleep on it."

He didn't sleep on it long. The fire of that particular ambition had all burned out. At midnight the liveryman

goggled drowsily at him, inquiring, "Birnam? What Birnam?"

"That big bay," commanded the bandaged apparition. "Saddle him. Then help me on. Tie my legs."

He rode the cold moon westward up into the Fra Cristobals and found a silent and abandoned camp. He struck the tracks and urged Birnam on. Over the Fra Cristobals, into the Santa Josefa range. Across the Santa Josefa. A man in a mad hurry, asked by ranchmen to light and rest awhile. Begged by pitying Mexican women of the tiny *ranchitos* to come down off that bloody, sweaty saddle—*por Dios*, for God's sake—*pobrecito loco*, poor madman. Give this up. Take rest. There are other women.

He pushed on, speaking to the bay, often incoherently, but the bay understood. The bay kept on, knowing the tracks as well as the crazy man in the saddle.

They crossed the high Sierras at Fort Despair, the old trail, and now Dike's hands were fastened in Birnam's mane by clotted blood. The saddle horn punched his chest.

He descended the dry haul west of Despair, stopping only for a filled canteen, snarling insanely at the men of that post who warned him against going on. He came to a grassed plain where the passing of a band of men and horses and wagons drew a dusty line, the only sign of life visible in a forgotten land.

He raised a weak hail, unheard in the vast stillness. He said to Birnam, "Boy, we're done up. God make 'em hear us." He raised the hail once more, to the caravan ahead.

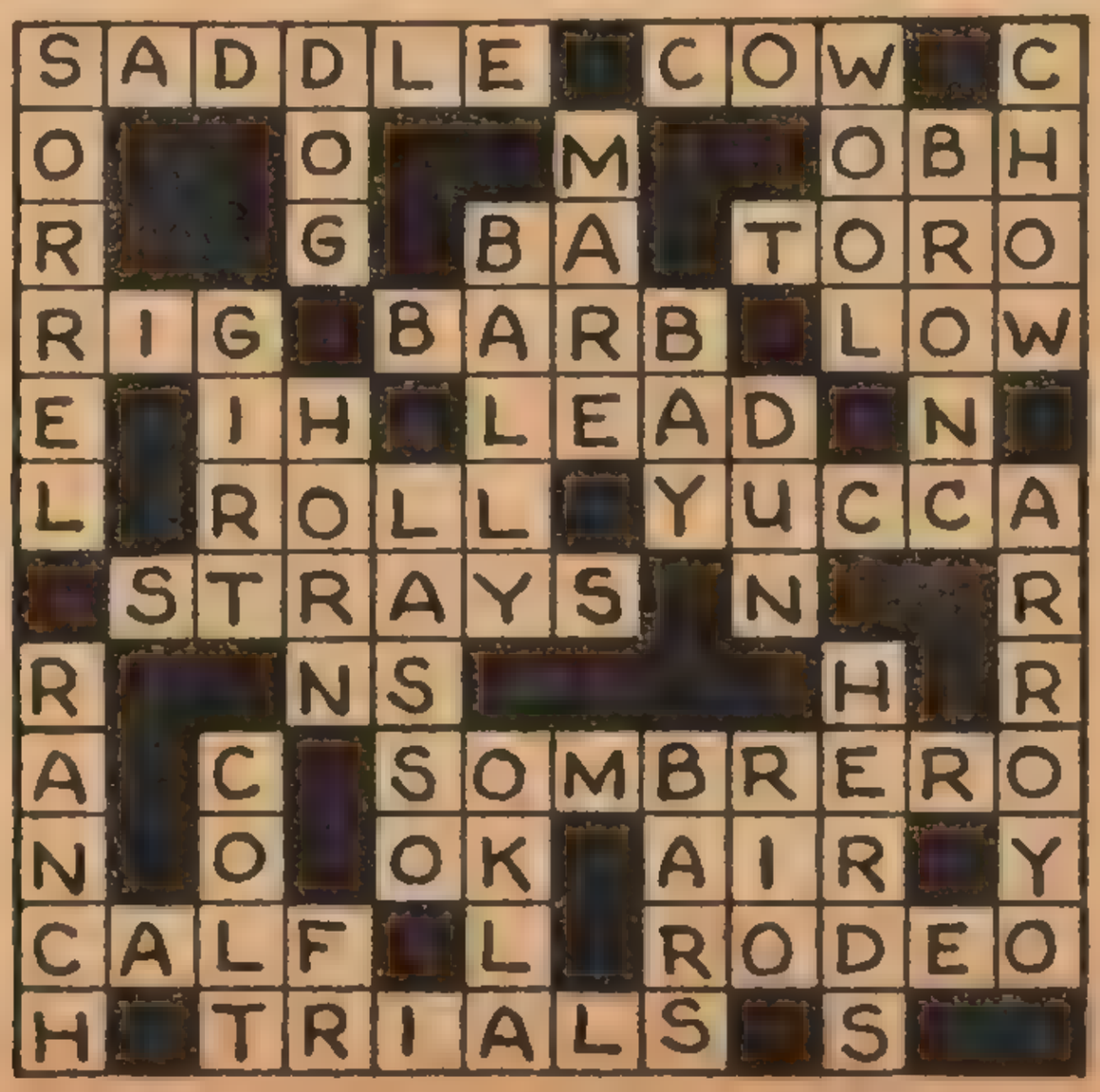
A lone rider detached from the caravan, wheeling back. It came riding back fast to the man slumped over the neck of the spent bay horse.

"Hello," Dike mumbled. "Hello, Linda-perhaps. It's been a long old ride."

She rode alongside and held him up. "Hello, Dike. A long old ride. You'll never know."

THE END

Solution to "A Western Acrostic" puzzle on page 106



FREE-FOR-ALL

THE NOVEL SPOT in this month's ZGWM is once again filled by old-hand author Allan Vaughan Elston. "Roundup on the Picketwire" is more proof that Elston is 'way up in the top layer of today's Western writers. "Roundup on the Picketwire" will soon be published in book form by Lippincott.

• Another old ZGWM favorite, L. L. Foreman, returns with a high-powered novelette, "Vagabond Vaquero." Foreman's heroes are invariably colorful cusses, as well as fightin' fools, and Dike Ladore, who *wants* to be solid-citizen and respected, turns out to just about the wildest and fightin'est of 'em all!

• Edwin L. Sabin's word-portrait of Old Bill Williams, "Lone Bull," and Omar Barker's piece on the diamond-back's foes, "Rough on Rattlers," are also contributions from ZGWM old-timers; and the T. J. Kerttula-D. L. McDonald team, with "Battle of the Bobwire," are approaching that status.

• Among all these familiar names, that of Kenneth Fowler, newcomer-author of "No Man to Mourn Him," stands out noticeably. Here's information to answer your "Who's he?" query:

Ken Fowler began serious free-lance fictioneering in '42; since then he's authored some two hundred short stories and novelettes. In earlier years he was a newspaperman, starting with cub-reporter days on the old Yonkers (N.Y.) *Herald*, later becoming city-hall and political reporter on that town's *Herald-Statesman*. An ex-book reviewer, one of Ken's fondest memories is of a night when the late Sinclair Lewis called him up to praise his review of *It Can't Happen Here*. Another literary recollection he cherishes is receiving a two-page letter from Margaret Mitchell extolling his review of *Gone With the Wind* and adding "payment" in the form of a Confederate shinplaster inscribed to him by Miss Mitchell!

Ken has worked both sides of the magazine street, having been associate editor of *Western Story* Magazine and an editor for Popular Publications before turning writer. His fictioneering career was interrupted by a hitch in the Army Air Force, during which he edited a service newspaper and han-

dled publicity. Later he did public-relations work for a shipbuilding outfit; after two years of this he married his boss's secretary and "decamped" with her to their present home "in the wilds of Copake Falls, N. Y."

● "Dead Men Tell Tales"—why, bellerin' buffler, if 'taint another yarn 'bout that Paintin' Pistoleer feller, Justin Other Smith, and his offtimes ornery and perenially perturbed cow-town compatriots! Title of the next, author Two-Gun Tompkins informs us threateningly, is to be "Sam's Son—and Delighted."

● Comments on that "All Star" issue of last November have been coming in and, on the whole, have been very gratifying. Mrs. Lucille Webb, of Jourdanton, Texas, collects a three-dollar check for her interesting letter:

"Your All Star issue was tops from story to the poem. Especially the poem: it makes you want to go to New Mexico and see all that Mr. Barker has seen. I really liked 'Powdersmoke Empire'; it was different and a refreshing change from the old song of ruthless land grabbers and outsmarting hero. There are too many songs like that and this new tune was as refreshing as a gay melody when you're blue. 'Memento' made good reading but I didn't like the ending till I realized the idea was to show *how* some 'bad Injuns' got that way. I didn't like 'Traitor Town' because the heroine took the hero back and played second fiddle; I'd've second-fiddled him over the head! I appreciated 'Cows and Cowmen,' which brought a *real* touch of the Old West to us; thanks a lot for it. 'Tappan's Burro' was artistically written but sad. Anyway it was a swell collection of stories—which ZGWM usually is—but this was a little 'specialer' and I read and enjoyed every word."

● Another of Norman A. Fox's great rangeland novels, *Stormy in the West*, is being added to the Dell Book pocket-edition series in February.

—THE EDITORS.

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Subscriptions received by February 20 start with the April issue; those received after February 20 start with the May issue.

IN RATTLESNAKE COUNTRY

AT REST, the rattlesnake's body is coiled, with head plumb center. Before striking, he generally throws himself into a couple or so U-shaped loops, but he can strike from either position, shooting out about three-fourths of his length. In times of danger he'll try to hide or make for a near-by hole or just run away, but he'll fight if cornered. A quick-moving man could put his foot on the snake as Mr. Rattler crawls into a hole, pinning the critter down, then grab hold and try to jerk him out. But, amigos, that isn't done in rattlesnake country! The moment he enters the hole the snake turns his head back toward the entrance, while the rest of his body slithers in. So, catch the tail, remove your foot—and the rattler's head shoots out like greased lightning and your hand is bitten.

When camping out in rattler country, the cowboy circles his bedroll with a horsehair rope, as shown. Rattlesnakes will seldom if ever crawl across a hair rope. As for me, I'd sooner meet up with a lobo wolf than cut a rattler's trail, anytime!

DAN MULLER

In this Issue:

ROUNDUP ON THE PICKETWIRE
by Allan Vaughan Elston

A complete novel of rangeland mystery, fast-paced and suspenseful. Johnny Diamond, at the Colorado end of a long, tough trail that began in Texas, is bent on finding and punishing the men who wiped out his family. He brushes aside the well-meant advice of a lawman and his pretty daughter, both of whom condemn the idea of personal vengeance. Using a clue here and a hunch there, Johnny soon stirs up a hornets' nest and is made the target for plenty of bushwhack lead. He makes things worse by pointing the finger of suspicion at Rick Sherwood, a prosperous ranchman and the favored suitor of the lawman's daughter—but at last the case busts wide open and the mystery is solved as hot lead flies in a stunning payoff fight.

VAGABOND VAQUERO, *by L. L. Foreman*

A tension-filled action novelette. Young Dike Ladore aims to break his family tradition by living a quiet, respectable life and dying of old age, but the clan of wandering, carefree Blades—including the entrancing Linda-perhaps—cross his path. Good resolutions go smash and Hades is uncorked for sure!

ROUGH ON RATTLERS, *by S. Omar Barker*

Fascinating Western lore. Ol' *Crotalus atrox* deserves all the wide-walking respect that he customarily gets, but he has a thing or three to fear his ownself!

NO MAN TO MOURN HIM, *by Kenneth Fowler*

Big Jesse was slated to die, but he had an ace in the hole that he figured might top the sheriff's hangnoose trump.

—and other features, including Randy Steffen's pictorial feature "Mustanger" and a new "Paintin' Pistoleer" yarn by Walker A. Tompkins.

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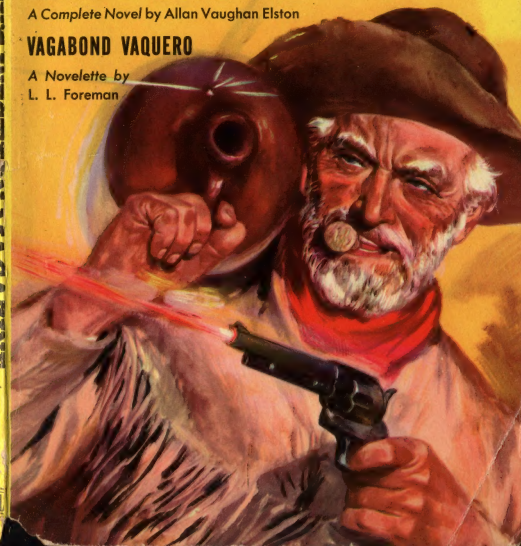
ROUNDUP ON THE PICKETWIRE

A Complete Novel by Allan Vaughan Elston

VAGABOND VAQUERO

A Novelette by L. L. Foreman